

Social infrastructure platforms: the case of AskingBristol

Social
infrastructure
platforms

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Abstract

Purpose – The project – AskingBristol – uses university students to connect third sector organizations with particular “asks” to organizations which might be able to respond with “offers”. The authors describe the task of the experiment as being an attempt to embed students and their universities within the cities that they are based in, but are often not really very connected to.

Design/methodology/approach – This reflective report on practice describes an initiative aimed at producing a piece of “social infrastructure”. Written by the four people involved, the authors theorize and evaluate what we have done so far and what we hope to do in future.

Findings – Over two phases, it has had some success, and we think represents a concrete approach to thinking about how “civic” ideas might gain traction within universities. Using ideas about social networks, boundary objects and infrastructure the authors explore the opportunities and problems of such a project, stressing that it allows co-ordination between a wide variety of people and organizations that do not necessarily share common interests.

Research limitations/implications – This is one “experiment”, in one city, but it demonstrates the possibilities of getting “civic” universities engaged with local third sector organizations.

Practical implications – If it became a piece of social infrastructure, such a project could embed ideas about “civic”, “impact”, “engagement” and so on into the routines of the city and the university.

Social implications – Though Asking Bristol cannot solve the problems of the city, it shows that we can transfer resources, time, skills and space to where they are needed.

Originality/value – The authors do not think anything like this has been attempted before, and hope that sharing it will stimulate some comparisons, and perhaps some dissemination of the idea.

Keywords Higher education, Social impact, Social networks, Social infrastructure, Boundary objects, Civic university

Paper type Case study

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Introduction

Eastside Community Trust manages Easton Community Centre in the heart of East Bristol. Through AskingBristol, they were connected with Collecteco who supplied them with donations of furniture to fill the newly decorated foyer area with comfy sofas and coffee tables that will provide visitors with a place to rest, meet, work and enjoy a cuppa from the cafe.

“We are so pleased with the match, the furniture we received through AskingBristol was of great quality and has really brightened up the foyer area at Easton Community Centre. After the last 18 months we have, they provide a comfy and welcoming space for members of the community to come together again.” Stacy Yelland, CEO, Eastside Community Trust

“It has been a pleasure to support Eastside Community Centre with donations of furniture. It is lovely being able to support local community centres with donations of office furniture, so that they can spend their funding on what they do best, helping people, rather than buying new kit.” Steve Sliney, Managing Director, Collecteco [1].

This paper is a report on an ongoing “experiment” – AskingBristol – which as far as we know is unique [2]. The project involves constructing a piece of “social infrastructure” (Klinenberg, 2018) in order to connect “asks” from third sector organizations to “offers” from a whole variety of organizations, and is using university students as the connectors, or as we are calling them, the “AskAuthors”. In methodological terms, this is probably best described as a piece of “action research” in the sense that we are attempting to understand something about how to produce enduring social change (Bradbury-Huang, 2015). At the time of writing, two



of the authors of this paper are trying to work out how to scale up the project, so this paper is a report on what we have done so far, as well as trying to think through some of the concepts that might help us understand what we mean by social infrastructure, and how it connects to existing networks within our city, and also creates new ones.

The context of this paper is an UK city in which, during term time, at least 10% of the population are students at the two universities [3]. Over the last 30 years, UK higher education has been subject to two rather different policy imperatives. On the one hand, very rapid student number growth has been encouraged by quasi-market competition between institutions combined with the disappearance of student number caps. At the same time, there have been intensifying complaints that the sector is insufficiently sensitive to labor markets, professional skills, innovative research and development, access and diversity and so on (Brink, 2018; Sperlinger *et al.*, 2018). In summary, student numbers have ballooned, but universities are still accused of being ivory towers. This provokes quite a few questions, not least about UK HE policy, but the one that motivates this paper is to explore how the sheer scale of universities within certain UK cities might now be used to address systemic inequalities within those cities and regions, whilst also providing a more engaged curriculum for students.

The City of Bristol, a port city in the south west of England, is a very divided place. The north west contains some extremely affluent districts, both urban and suburban, and is also the site for an old elite university with around 30 thousand students and a similarly sized new university. This means that the economy and culture of the urban area, particularly the north and west, is massively affected by the students, staff or employees of these two universities. The east and south of the city is very different, with a more diverse population, lower average life expectancy, higher reported crime, poorer housing and much lower rates of higher education participation [4]. On the one side are Georgian squares and expensive coffee shops full of people on laptops, on the other, 1960s tower blocks and concrete underpasses beneath dual carriageways. This “tale of two cities” has been a continual refrain in discussion about the city and within the city [5], in part because the affluent half is driving up property prices, gentrifying districts and causing a great deal of speculative development whilst the other half continues to be “left behind”.

Unsurprisingly, both universities have a wide variety of initiatives which are intended to connect them to the city and the region. Many of these are direct responses to a series of state level policy makers attempts to alter institutional and academic incentives in order to encourage “impact” and “engagement”, “third mission activity” as well as the formulation of the “civic” university as one that aims to be useful to its city and region (Hazelkorn *et al.*, 2016). The general diagnosis is that elite universities have become too inward looking, that academics need to turn away from their obscure fascinations and find problems in the world outside that they can usefully address (for example, Brink, 2018; Schwittay, 2021; Śliwa and Kellard, 2022). In addition, there are persistent suggestions that students are best served by “work integrated learning”, “service learning” and so on (Cooper *et al.*, 2010, Aramburuzabala *et al.*, 2019). It seems that insides need to become connected to outsides, but how? What are the mechanisms for ensuring enduring connections between universities and their city regions? This is the question that this paper seeks to explore in both theoretical and practical terms.

We use the idea of “social infrastructure” (Klinenberg, 2018; Latham and Layton, 2019) as a way of thinking about how we might characterize the ways that any institution operates across and beyond its imagined boundaries. The idea that organizations have boundaries is a common sense one, but it normally refers to either a spatial distinction between the inside and outside of buildings, or a line conjured by some sort of business plan or mission statement. In the case of a university and a city, such divides become empirically hard to draw as students and employees reshape the city – working in coffee

shops, volunteering for local charities, acting as the driver for speculative accommodation developments, buying concert tickets and driving up rents and house prices. Despite such obvious actual “leakiness”, deliberately producing positive impact strategically and reflectively is often harder for institutions to do (Sliwa and Kellard, 2022). In what follows, we explore the idea that some sort of social infrastructure is required in order to ensure that an university, and perhaps any other institution, can effectively and enduringly transact with other parts of its environment.

In this paper, we bring together four voices who were involved in the AskingBristol project in 2021. Martin is a social science academic at the University of Bristol and was lead for the Inclusive Economy Initiative [6], which works with organizations within the city to help tilt towards a low carbon, high inclusion and high democracy economy. John was previously one of the directors of Hewlett–Packard’s research laboratory in the city and was High Sheriff during 2020–21, which was when this phase of the “experiment” took place. Hannah and James were University of Bristol students employed as paid interns during 2021 to train the ask authors, create the website, write stories and manage the project. This paper was mostly written by Martin, with the help of the others, but contains accounts of the project written by James, Hannah and John. We would not want you to think that these voices are somehow representative of the city, but instead provide different accounts of the project which show how “social infrastructure” can function without complete shared agreement (Star, 2010).

We begin by describing the project, and the city, in terms of social networks, and then move on to opening up ideas about boundary objects and social infrastructure. We suggest that AskingBristol aspires to become a piece of social infrastructure, but that it runs the danger of doing no more than reproducing existing social networks within a divided city. This is then followed by four stories about the project from Martin (an academic), John (retired research manager) and James and Hannah (one ex and one current student). Each has slightly different accounts of the work they were doing, which seems to suggest that AskingBristol can mean different things to different people, yet still do useful co-ordinating work. We conclude with some thoughts on the problems and opportunities of the project, and the helpfulness of thinking about it as social infrastructure, as well as the limits of any such project in the context of a city which shows systemic social divisions.

Asking a city

Social networks can be described, and are limited by, who and what someone knows, where they live, where they work and so on (Scott and Carrington, 2011). The same is true of third sector organizations, charities and voluntary groups which have networks which are aggregates of the people who work and volunteer for them. If a third sector organization wanted help with a task that they were doing, or needed to borrow something, and assuming that their immediate network could not help, they would be likely to ask someone from one of the places that members go to, people that they work or study with, maybe someone in a club or gym, or perhaps they would post a question on a social media platform where they are linked to other contacts. But what if it was possible to ask an entire city? This was the idea behind AskingBristol, an “experiment” intended to understand whether it is possible to produce what we are calling a “hyper-connected” city. It is clear that there are already lots of social networks within the city of Bristol, but they tend to be limited to the areas that people live in, or the places they work and worship, or the sports and schools they share. Just like any network, it tends to be homophilic, connecting people who already share connections (Scott, 2017; Borgatti *et al.*, 2018).

What the AskingBristol project is attempting is to knit together some of these connections. We, the authors of this paper, have worked at beginning to create a network of networks which allows requests or “asks” to be shared across the city. In order to do this, we contacted charities, community organizations and social groups and asked them what they needed. Bristol, like any medium sized city, has thousands of these organizations and they represent just about every different area and identity, from the centre to the outskirts, from a Polish social centre to a play school for children with learning difficulties, a place based support group for older people or a Somali women’s group. At the same time as collecting “asks” we collected people and organizations who might be able to help by making “offers” of things given, things lent, spaces lent, volunteering time and specialized expertise. These tended to be big organizations, such as companies, professional associations and educational and health institutions, but it also included the larger community anchor organizations in the city.

Most importantly for the purposes of this paper, we used students from the two universities to be what we called “AskAuthors” to speak to the charities and collect the requests. The students were trained, and then had structured conversations with some representatives from the organization which encouraged them to focus down onto five clearly defined asks. The more precise the asks the better. “We need a space for 20 people to meet every month on a Tuesday in the north of the city.” “We need to borrow an electricity generator for a weekend in May so that we can hold a festival for our partners.” “We need help with designing our website in the next few months.” The students then filled in a form which detailed the ask, and then we try to ensure the organization receives an “offer” from one of the organizations in our network.

Clearly our network is partial and dynamic. It can never be an accurate representation of all the organizations in the city, partly because there are too many, and they are changing all the time. In addition, there is no Archimedean point from which to see a network. How any participant “sees” a network – and hence how we have constructed ours – depends on who they know, and that in turn is a product of a series of intersectionalities of gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality and so on that are themselves manifest in geography, occupation, education and so on (Borgatti *et al.*, 2014; Hogan, 2021). There can be no complete network of networks, but 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 and that uses some of the city’s very large number of students as volunteer labor. This clearly will not replace smaller networks based around communities of place and identity, and we have no intention of doing that, but the ambition is to produce something that functions like a citywide web. Our hope is that this will be the beginning of conversations that might lead to some genuinely useful connections and demonstrate that the city and its institutions can be more than the sum of its parts. In addition, we hope that this will demonstrate the importance of universities, and any other institutions that desire to be socially responsible, helping to build enduring forms of “social infrastructure”. If terms like “civic”, or any of the other currently fashionable synonyms, are to do anything useful then they must be ways of building long term relations and translations between the university and the city. But first, what do we mean by social infrastructure?

Social infrastructure

The term “infrastructure” seems helpful in thinking about the sort of enduring relations we are trying to describe here, in part because it does not limit itself to what happens within one particular organization or encourage us to imagine that the agency of particular categories of human being – activists, academics, professionals and policy makers – is the lever that moves the world. It is also a helpful mediating term in bringing together the social and technical – both people and things – and recognizing that non-human materials such as spreadsheets and buildings shape the social and vice versa. Infra is that which is “below”, unseen and assumed. Social and organizational practice are channeled by existing patterns of

infrastructure, and the channels that already exist shape the actions that are likely, and sometimes even possible. “Social infrastructure” is hence something that produces “the material foundations for social life” – libraries, coffee shops and streets – the more or less enduring spaces and connections that allow people and things to come together in productive ways (Klinenberg, 2018, p. 16). Here we are exploring what work the concept might do in understanding the problem of how universities might be productively conjoined with many small and large third sector organizations in their city regions.

With an etymology that owes much to the military and construction, the term “infrastructure” gained its contemporary social scientific usage following a paper by the sociologist Susan Leigh Star which developed the insight that “plugs, standards, and bureaucratic forms” could be studied as a way of thinking about how the social world is put together (1999, p. 377). This decentered the human being to some extent, encouraging attention to mundane bits and pieces of non-human technology, particularly those that connected things to other things, insides and outsides, different times and spaces that seem remote from each other. This was a development of Star’s work on “boundary objects”, which in turn was predicated on her observation that co-operation can very often happen without consensus. There are many examples of groups with different interests co-ordinating action together, but they often do not share common understandings, so how does this take place? Her answer was that there can be agreements about the use of common objects, even if there was no agreement about what these objects were for. The use of the word “object” here should not necessarily be taken to mean a non-human material “thing”, since it really means a “referent”, which could also be a spreadsheet, a practice, a place or whatever. What is important is that it provides a common orientation, such that co-ordination can happen. So, for example, a catalogue of objects might allow different categories of people to access the same objects, without agreement about what these objects were for, and what could be done with them. Once such an arrangement becomes scaled up, or standardized, then it becomes infrastructure (Star, 2010, p. 605).

Infrastructure encourages repetition in that it makes certain movements easy, and others more difficult. For example, in many countries, the transport infrastructure makes it easy to get to the capital city, but much harder to travel between smaller towns. Star suggests various characteristics of infrastructure that build on her observations in a variety of social settings. She suggests that it is often “invisible”, has temporal and spatial reach, is embedded in and embeds social arrangements and often connects to other infrastructures or tools in ways that sometimes make it hard to change (Star, 2010, p. 611). It is “installed” in keyboards and membership of particular groups, in clothing and qualifications, language and buildings, forms and budgets. It is also in movement, never final and finished because infrastructures can fall into disuse, fail or disappear, depending on how useful they are at structuring relations which need to be repeated. This allows us to suggest that a boundary object is ill-structured infrastructure, and well-structured boundary objects become infrastructure. The distinction is effectively one of how standardized the relations become, how routine and codified the movements across a boundary are.

Asking Bristol is certainly imagined as a boundary object, although we did not use that term in the first few phases of the project. The only technology that we used was the online equivalent of a spreadsheet, but we talked a lot about The Tree, a metaphor which connected third sector organizations with “asks” to other organizations with capacities to “offer” and used students as the relays in the network. We often talked about growing The Tree, and used metaphors of roots, nodes, branches and leaves. Importantly though, we anticipated that this tree structure would become more dense and entangled as we went along. We particularly hoped that the larger third sector organizations, those usually termed “community anchors”, would be able to be both receivers and givers in the network, partly in order to ensure that our practice did not only encourage “wealthy” organizations to give to “poor” organizations, which would simply echo a hierarchical charitable model that we did not want to repeat. However, as noted above, our tree should not be imagined to be a

comprehensive or balanced representation of third sector organizations within the city. It was intended to connect, but could never encompass all the different possibilities for connection.

What is crucial is that within this imagined system it was not necessary that different actors shared a common purpose, but rather (as [Star, 1999](#) suggested) that they oriented themselves towards a common piece of social infrastructure. Academics and other university employees, managers from third sector and commercial organizations, students and citizens did not need to agree on their interests in any detail, because (in principal) AskingBristol should be able to translate different interests into co-ordinated activity. A student might want experience for their CV, a third sector manager want free materials or skills, a professional want to find pro bono clients, a commercial or university manager to say something about their corporate social responsibility or civic strategy and so on. That is to say, all these concerns and capacities could be different, as long as the social infrastructure could co-ordinate shared action.

In order to illustrate something about these varied interests, we now present four accounts, each written by one of us, which provide a rich picture of AskingBristol's practice as well as stressing the differences between what each of us imagined it to be. Each of these was a one thousand word responses to the question "tell us about your experience of AskingBristol", and have been lightly edited for publication.

Four stories

The inclusive economy initiative – Martin's story

For many years, I have had an academic interest in "alternative" forms of organization and exchange, and an enduring sense that universities could and should be incubators for radical thought and experimentation ([Parker et al., 2014](#); [Parker, 2018](#)). Bristol is a city with a very rich and varied series of engagements with tilting towards a low carbon, high inclusion and high democracy economy, and it offered an extraordinary landscape for engaging with activists in just about every sector. The city is the base for the UK HQ of Triodos Bank, Sustrans, The Soil Association, the Centre for Sustainable Energy, was European Green Capital in 2015, has a long tradition of co-ops, many employee owned organizations and B-Corps, a large and active credit union, used to have its own local money, and the City Council was one of the first to declare a climate emergency. In 2018, the leadership of a new research institute became vacant, so I applied with a letter that outlined a programme of work focused on the co-production of research and policy with the alternative businesses and networks that existed in the city region. This eventually became the inclusive economy initiative (IEI) which, despite the virus driving activity online, became the vehicle for my engagement with AskingBristol. The other existing piece of infrastructure that was invaluable was the Professional Liaison Network, part of the Faculty of Social Sciences that co-ordinates connections between students, academics and external organizations [7]. It allowed us to employ and pay two interns – Hannah and James – funded by John, to work on the AskingBristol project.

The "internal" justification for the IEI was connected to the development of a new city campus for the university, about three miles from the part of the city where most of the university was based. This area was next to the main railway station, adjacent to a large area of old industrial land and near some of the more deprived neighbourhoods in the city. There was a strong sense that this represented the university coming down from the hill, and clear ambitions that the new campus – Temple Quarter (TQ) – should be open to the city both architecturally and practically. There were many discussions about how the ground floor of the main building could be opened to the city, which third sector and private sector organizations could be co-located there, whether the buildings could stay open in the evenings and weekends and so on. There were also plans for programmes of support for encouraging job applications from under-represented groups, childcare provision, rooms designed to be used by the general public, procurement practices focused on social value and so on. There was even support for a "micro-

campus” in a deprived area of the city, using shipping container offices to locate some projects several miles from the main site [8].

The TQ “ethos” was articulated as an embodiment of the university’s civic ambitions, and hence by framing IEI as a TQ/civic project, it was given support by senior university management. I was bought out for 50% of my workload and given a small budget for administrative and other support (Parker, 2023 forthcoming). IEI reflected many other changes in UK higher education too. Ideas about encouraging and measuring the “impact” of academic research had become embedded into the research audit process for a decade, and this had expanded out into a family of concepts and practices which were all broadly attempting to connect the classroom, laboratory and office to the concerns of the wider world. Even if this world was often imagined in commercial terms, as technology spin-outs, the language was reshaping the way that parts of the institution imagined how it was connected to the city, region and state. “Catapults” accelerated “innovation”; “partnerships” and “collaborations” focused on “translational” research; and the terms “co-production” and “engagement” seemed to be attached to almost everything that the university did with any outside organization.

Nonetheless, for elite universities like Bristol and others this was something of a challenge, and it was clear that many of the core parts of the institution remained comparatively untouched. The main income streams of the university continued to be teaching fees and research grants, and there were often references to protecting “disciplinary excellence”, which appeared to be code for business as usual. It was also clear that the driver for many of the changes was financial, with projections of potential income from intellectual property, patents, fees and contracts. Even some of the more radical versions of co-production were justified in terms of having a pre-existing range of regional “partners” who could be slotted into large research bids when needed. Many of the biggest grants were becoming complex multi-partner affairs, and so having a range of local third sector organizations that could represent “inclusion” and “diversity”, was seen to be strategically sensible.

The idea of the “civic” university as one that aims to be useful to its city and region (Hazelkorn *et al.*, 2016) was hence in a certain tension with these more utilitarian justifications. Was a particular strategy being justified because it was good for the university or good for the city? Rather like many of the words used to express some sort of movement of people, things and ideas across the boundaries of the institution, “civic” was semantically flexible enough to mean different things to different people, and also to be combined with ideas about innovation, engagement, co-production to produce sentences that sounded broadly convincing and meaningful. The term, like so many others, was an aspiring boundary object.

Despite different emphases, many of these words seemed to be aimed at justifying or describing an imagined relationship between an organization and its environment. The diagnosis was that the university was too “closed” and the solution was that it needed to become more “open”. Such a general statement would produce much nodding, but often not a great deal of discussion about exactly what should happen, or not happen, as a result. There were plenty of examples of projects, grants and teaching that were celebrated as examples of the civic, but not a great deal of systematic discussion about where and when the university wanted to be present, what it would pay for and how, who it would employ and on what basis, how it would incentivize its staff to be “civic”, who could use its facilities and so on. In a sense the discussion very often stayed at the level of “values” and did not engage with questions of “organization” or “infrastructure”. How would this new type of university be produced? Or, to ask the obvious question, why doesn’t it happen already?

Towards a hyper-connected City – John’s story

I have always been interested in systems, and how we might understand and practice them. My earlier career with Hewlett–Packard led me to think a lot about complex networks, and

the connections that shape and drive the movement of information. My current involvement in the voluntary, charity or not-for-profit sector has led me to think about that as a system too, in this case a market. It is rarely thought of as being one, and many actors within that system would find such a view challenging, but I think that there are some insights to be gained if one takes that view.

AskingBristol has four principles. The first is to democratize asking, giving and connecting in the Greater Bristol area. Democratizing in the first instance means treating all the charities and voluntary and community groups equally. An ask from a community group run by two part-time volunteers should be treated no differently from an ask from a charity with a turnover in the tens, or even the hundreds of millions of pounds. It is worth observing, although it is quite obvious, that an ask from a very small charity is itself likely to be very small and consequently quite easy to fulfill. It is less obvious, but borne out by our experience, that the thanks and gratitude for that fulfillment is disproportionately great, because it usually makes a significant difference to that group's ability to care for those it supports or the activities it provides for others. Because a typical small third sector organization is part of a geographical community or based on shared ideas and concerns, such as a faith group or charity benefitting people with learning difficulties, it is often not well connected into the individuals, companies and organizations of the wider region that would be well placed to help them.

The second principle is that asks should be as precise as possible. For the version of our project that we are reporting on here we used six categories: things given, things lent, spaces lent, volunteering (time), expertise and advice and money. The reason for making asks precise is that it is more efficient to direct them to an individual, company or organization able to help. Working with the groups on their asks and encouraging specificity also helps them better understand what it is they are really asking for, which might not always be what they initially asked for.

The third is to make the system largely bottom-up. It starts with the asks from the groups which are then routed through The Tree to leaf nodes. The metaphor of The Tree represents and realizes the connectivity of the City Region. The leaf nodes are the individuals, companies and organizations capable of fulfilling the precise asks – the category and nature of the ask is what informs the routing. The ask is the principal object of a system which is organized around the extraction, shaping and routing of asks. In cloud computing terms, AskingBristol is an Asks Service Provider giving Asks-as-a-Service. The connectivity of Greater Bristol embodied in The Tree is similar to the Internet. The only difference is that in the Internet the routing is done by computers, while in AskingBristol it is done by university students and domain experts who might be professional specialists in accounting, printing, performance, or people in organizations with under used capacity or resources. It is really important not to take a top-down approach and assume we know what others need or can give because many of the groups remain hidden or unknown and only become visible when they engage with the project.

The fourth principle is that the connectivity of the city region is both the precondition and outcome of AskingBristol's success. I would argue that Bristol is already an unusually connected City. This is a result of explicit efforts over the last few decades to bring together the many different parts that comprise the business, educational, voluntary, sporting, artistic, community and public sector groupings. This is what makes routing through the rapidly branching Tree both feasible and productive. The intermediate nodes in The Tree perform some form of fan-out because they know the set of onward nodes that are capable of matching particular sorts of ask in their domain. Examples of these intermediate nodes are trade bodies, professional associations, universities, anchor organizations (location-based) and network organizations (non-location-based). In some cases it may be a group of individuals who have expertise in a particular domain, such as volunteering. Volunteering is a very broad domain

with many organizations having mechanisms for engaging and organizing volunteers for various purposes. Having a set of these domain experts doing the routing, such as the Bristol City Council “Can Do” platform or the University of Bristol Students Union volunteering website [9], fits nicely with our ambitions for AskingBristol. We do not need to control, or even see, everything within the system, merely engineer certain sorts of relationships and then hope that they produce socially productive outcomes.

Even in what appears to be a limited region like Greater Bristol the primary challenge to the successful implementation of AskingBristol is scale. The charity commission gives the number of registered charities in the former Avon area (City of Bristol, North Somerset, South Gloucestershire, Bath and North East Somerset) as 4300 [10]. In addition there are all the community and voluntary groups that are not registered charities. The number of these is unknown and it is constantly changing. We can also distinguish two types of community. Those based on location and those not. The city covers 40 square miles and this compact area still has about 90 identifiable “villages” ranging from the better known (Clifton and St Pauls) to the barely known (Inns Court and Pile Marsh). All these location-based communities have a few or many community and voluntary groups and some have an anchor organization to provide shared services and greater influence. The non-location-based communities include faith communities, language-based communities (over 95 languages are spoken in Bristol), sporting communities, environmental and conservation communities, medical and health-oriented communities. The total number of charities and voluntary/community groups in the City of Bristol is unknown and unknowable but it seems reasonable that the number in the Greater Bristol area is closer to 10 thousand. If each in a typical year has 20 asks that is 200,000 asks – a challenging prospect. This scale can only be handled if the extraction of asks and their routing through The Tree is highly efficient. It can also only be handled if the capacity of the leaf nodes is similarly large. This means that organizations with most capacity in the region have to be fully engaged. The clearest examples are the two universities, which between them have 60,000 students, over 10,000 staff and 30,000 city region alumni, but we could add to this two large hospitals, the city council, schools and colleges, large businesses and so on.

My big ambition of AskingBristol is to create the world’s first hyperconnected City. The connectivity of the City previously discussed can be visualized on a sheet of paper. If all the citizens, businesses and organizations are represented as dots on that sheet, and then all the existing connections are made as lines joining the endpoints, we obtain a deep and dense representation of a network. If a successful match is made between a charity and a business, for example, that can be represented as a line that goes through the sheet of paper – a new connection between disparate parts, locations and individuals. We move from a 2D superconnected city on the sheet of paper to a 3D hyperconnected city, and this will be very clear when hundreds of thousands of asks have been successfully fulfilled. A hyperconnected city will radically enhance social cohesion and begin to redistribute resources, to the benefit of all the citizens of Greater Bristol.

Getting to know the city – James’ story

As I entered the final year of my Economics degree at Bristol University, I was struck with an odd feeling. I loved the place where I had spent the last three years of my life developing as a person, but I felt disconnected from it. Parts of Bristol felt very familiar, yet others completely alien, as if I was living in a small bubble within the city.

I do not think I am the only one who has experienced this. Particularly as a student, it is easy to get absorbed into the student life, never leaving the triangle of “house – university – pub”. Often this all takes place in a concentrated area, leaving very little reason to ever venture outside of this bubble. What I found as I entered my final months at university was a

sudden moment of realization, as if just waking up and taking the time to look around me for the first time after three years. It does not take much to get lost in the madness of being a student, and I suddenly felt panicked as I began to realize all the opportunities that university had presented me with were coming to an end: the chance to meet a variety of different people, to try activities that I never normally would, or to play a role in helping communities around me.

As a result, I challenged myself to get involved in as many projects as I could. This led to me taking on a consultant role in two different student-led organizations, as well as a marketing role in the promotion of an online student-run event and helping to organize a charity campaign with my university football team. The paid intern position at AskingBristol came up soon after this and I had little hesitation in applying.

I remember reading the project brief and being fascinated by the ideas and motivations. It was unlike any other project I had come across during my university years and I remember the excitement of thinking that here was a project where I could have a real impact on the world around me. University can be frustrating at times as your work rarely leaves the institution or reaches ears beyond those of your lecturers. So, this felt like a chance for me to step outside the bubble and take on something that I could stamp with some of my own identity.

When I was chosen to become one of the interns, I was genuinely over the moon. AskingBristol was still in its early stages, so it felt like I was able to work on something new, and that was exciting. John and Martin told me from the outset that they were willing to work with Hannah, my fellow intern, and I on a collaborative level and I was amazed by how open they were to new ideas. This made me feel very welcome from the start, and I genuinely felt listened to, which is not always the case when you are surrounded by 30 thousand other students.

In terms of my expectations for the project, I was calmly optimistic. In a way it felt like we could not lose. Even if we helped one person through AskingBristol it would still have been a positive result. Looking at things in this way helped to take away a lot of the pressure of attempting to build the “perfect project”. It helped me to think freely about new and creative ways of pursuing objectives and it led to a relaxed and cooperative atmosphere between us. There were of course things to be wary of – inclusivity springs to mind. AskingBristol should not be a support project for the already established, or an out-of-touch university initiative that struggles to connect with ordinary people. It needed to balance the interests of students, charities and businesses alike. But how do you judge what is balanced and inclusive? Fairness is subjective, which made the process that much more complicated. I began to see why this sort of project may not have been successful before.

The second important issue was on maintaining human connection, even if it had to be done remotely because of COVID-19. It is easy to fall into the technology trap and to simplify everything to just a few clicks on a website. AskingBristol, in its use of students as “AskAuthors”, has placed human relations at the centre of the project. This did not mean rejecting the use of technology altogether, but rather thinking about how we can build human connection online. We have utilized certain aspects of modern technology, such as forms and spreadsheets, but only as tools to facilitate real-life interactions. I feel that this is especially important within the third sector where forming strong relationships and reaching people on an ethical and emotional level is so important.

I was a part of AskingBristol for six months. In that time, I learned more about Bristol than I had in those previous three and a half years. Even now, having finished my degree and left university, I still feel connected to the city. There have been so many highlights from this experience that it is difficult to put them all into words. I have been moved by the charity founders who I have had the opportunity to speak to about their work. I have traveled to parts of Bristol I had never visited and connected with people from a variety of different

backgrounds. We were able to get over 20 further students involved in the project as AskAuthors, allowing me to meet and learn from more like-minded people. We have currently published around 30 stories about matches we have made between charities and individuals and businesses, helping to resolve problems, give advice and begin forming what will hopefully be long-term relationships. I have also been able to express my creativity through the creation of a LinkedIn page, logo, leaflet and website, learning new technical skills and gaining confidence in myself along the way. The experience has been as enriching as any, and I am excited to see where it goes next.

The challenge now lies in turning AskingBristol into a city-wide initiative, allowing it to exist and thrive as its own entity, going from connecting with 100 charities to perhaps 10,000. Maintaining diversity and inclusivity at all levels will be a challenge and we are still learning as a group how best to approach these issues, especially in a city where there are such stark contrasts in culture, backgrounds and needs. Our feedback so far has been overwhelmingly positive but questions of fairness and equality continue to be central in building legitimacy for the project. I am excited for what is to come and am confident that we can help Bristol to become the hyperconnected city that it has the potential to be.

Networking a divided city – Hannah's story

I am currently a Politics and Sociology student at the University of Bristol. I am relatively new to Bristol and most of my experience was scuppered by COVID. I therefore welcomed the opportunity to gain some insight into the multitude of charities and community groups which populate the city. I can see how it is very possible to go through your time at university with little knowledge or interaction with anyone outside the university. I feel that this is a real shame, and I am eternally grateful to AskingBristol for enabling me to really immerse myself in the fabric of the city. The idea of becoming involved with a diverse range of communities in Bristol really appealed to me as diversity has always been central to my identity. This fascination can be attributed to the rich cultural heritage which I have been exposed to. Each of my grandparents represents one of the four major faiths and from an early age this sparked my desire to explore different cultures and social systems.

On reading the description of AskingBristol and what it aimed to achieve I was struck by its uniqueness, as it felt like something so simple and obvious yet clearly underexplored. I had previously interned with the Migrants' Rights Network which is concerned with the issues that migrant communities face today. Much of my role was considering how to increase the efficacy of the organization and it opened my eyes to the issues charities face. The function of AskingBristol seemed like a highly effective bridge in enhancing the efficiency of the workings of the third sector and therefore I was determined to be a part of it. I had also volunteered with a charity named WAND UK which specializes in integrating women from isolated backgrounds into the healthcare system and my experience there reinforced to me the importance of having organizations such as AskingBristol working to overcome the disconnect and isolation which some communities and organizations suffer. This meant that one of my greatest hopes for the project was that it would be able to connect the different areas of Bristol as it is currently one of the more segregated cities in the UK, given that wealth and resources are so unevenly distributed. It seems to me that different parts of Bristol are very separate from one another and often have little interaction but I felt that AskingBristol was successful in reaching and providing support to charities based in many different areas of the city.

That being said, I was a little apprehensive that the asks from charities would be unfeasible. This has not been the case at all; something which I am unsure whether we should credit to the fact that charities easily understood the function of AskingBristol due to the stories that we told about it, or to the effective training of student AskAuthors who were then

able to help shape the conversation to produce realistic asks. In this regard, the aspect of AskingBristol which I felt worked particularly well was the assigning of AskAuthors to charities in which they already held a prior interest. Not only did this mean that they were more invested in the needs of that particular issue and organization, but it also meant that they were able to build stronger bonds with the charities. This seemed to be the case despite the fact that this phase of the project was entirely remote due to the pandemic, and hence was perhaps in danger of lacking the personal touch which comes from in-person interactions.

Despite the success of our small “experiment”, there are still questions about the future, particularly whether AskingBristol can develop into a useful and financially sustainable organization. I do not want our work to be wasted and lost. However, from the conversations John has been having with various funders I am very hopeful for the future. This still leaves a question about how we evidence the impact that the project has made so far. I felt that we would struggle to measure the quantitative successes as no clear, initial indicator of success was identified. This meant that it would be difficult to draw any significant conclusions. As we draw to the end of this phase of the project this is still a topic we are struggling with as there is a difference of opinion over whether to try and focus more on the quantitative results (e.g., number of asks fulfilled, number of students engaged and so on) or the qualitative ones (which come in the form of the stories which we have published on the website).

Looking back to my initial introduction to the work of AskingBristol I now realize that the way in which we explain the concept is key to ensuring that people can understand what we want them to do. I found the concept difficult to digest at first until its aim was conveyed to me through some of our success stories. Therefore, I feel that when introducing new people and organizations to the network, telling them stories will prove essential. Whether this will prove to be the case for funders is another matter, since they may well expect some more quantitative measures as evidence of success.

Finally, one problem which I can see proving to be an issue moving forward is the central role John continues to play in the project. In many ways the credibility and functioning of AskingBristol relies too heavily on John given that we always mention his name when contacting charities and potential donor organizations. In my opinion, to achieve enduring impact, AskingBristol must create its own recognizable identity and a network which does not rely solely on the work and connections of one person. Despite his key role in developing the concept, the organization needs to formalize his knowledge in order that it can function without him.

Conclusion: social networks and social infrastructure

During the Pandemic Bristol North West Foodbank was overwhelmed by vulnerable clients needing help and support. [...] Many clients had lost their jobs, had been made redundant, suffered domestic abuse, suffered from anxiety and depression or ill health, including Covid. Due to the need to socially distance, Bristol North West Foodbank was not able to have in the warehouse the normal number of volunteers so non-perishable food had to be pre-packed into boxes. AskingBristol took the challenge of finding new cardboard boxes by approaching The Park, a neighbour in Avonmouth and one of Europe’s largest wine-bottling plants. Within days 800 boxes of excellent quality were delivered to the foodbank. We were so grateful for the help as the cost of buying the boxes would have meant less money would be spent on buying food. On behalf of Bristol North West Foodbank and their clients, a huge thank you must go to AskingBristol and to The Park for their kindness and support at what has been a very busy time for the Foodbank and a very stressful and sad time for so many vulnerable people in Bristol [11].

The AskingBristol project helped to construct a link in a network that addressed hunger during the pandemic. Any group of human beings creates a network. 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 (Scott, 2017; Borgatti *et al.*, 2018) with one important distinction being between “community” and the relatively anonymous city. 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 did not 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 was not 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 (Bauman, 2001).

AskingBristol is an action research project (Bradbury-Huang, 2015) which is attempting 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 “sociogram” of Bristol. 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.

As everyone who is familiar with Bristol also understands, this 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 does not include many people from Lawrence Weston. Networks tend to be “homophilic” because we tend to form bonds with people like us in terms of education, social class, gender and ethnic background (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1954). 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 Putnam (2000) 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 characterize our city then it must engineer connections that stitch across the city’s divides. It needs to be “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 top down “charity” from dense forms of collaboration which address shared problems. If we can do this then we stand a chance of achieving John’s ambition – to create the UK’s first “hyperconnected” city. However, given that this is an initiative which is connected to one of the elite institutions in the city, and which is based in part of the city which embeds a geography of inequality, this is a challenge. The reason for publishing this article is to share this challenge, and discover whether other similar projects are being conducted which share similar aims, or are using comparable methods, which can produce new social relations rather than merely reproducing already existing exclusions. It seems to us that the two stories we used at the beginning and end of this article, a selection from many more on the AskingBristol website, demonstrate the potential of our initiative, but we cannot yet show it working at scale.

This is precisely why we need to imagine AskingBristol as a form of social infrastructure, as a project that can connect across boundaries despite the fact that it might not mean the same to everyone. Eric Klineberg has argued that “social infrastructure” includes libraries, pavements and corner shops (2018), and we want to try to understand the civic university in this way too. As Susan Leigh Star noted, co-ordination can happen without shared beliefs as long as there is a shared “object” that allows agents to orient their action (1999). Social entrepreneurs like John, students like Hannah and James, academics like Martin, a host of third sector organizations with “asks” and a huge number of statutory, for-profit and charitable organizations with “offers” all might have different languages and motivations. The four voices we have here, people directly involved in the project, are rather too homogeneous, but even their differences illuminate the importance of producing co-operation without necessary agreement first. It certainly implies that other participants in The Tree would not see the project in the same way. Students might want career experience, a commercial organization might want to say something in their CSR report, a university might want to demonstrate its civic credentials, and an academic might want to write a research paper like this one. As long as social infrastructure exists to ensure that these motivations are translated into connections between asks and offers, then this boundary object is doing its work of translation.

To conclude where we began. In some cities in the global north, there is a density of students who are loosely connected to the indigenous populations of the city. AskingBristol is a project which uses some of these students as connectors between organizations that need resources and organizations that have resources. It addresses a problem for universities, provides enrichment opportunities for students, and directs time, space, expertise, materials and so on where third sector groups believe that they are needed. But let us also be clear about what it is not, because AskingBristol cannot solve the social problems that lead to the needs that third sector organizations are addressing, such as the fact that foodbanks are required to feed many of the city’s citizens, or that rents are too high for many people to live near to where they work. The landscape of inequality that produces opportunities for resource transfers across the city will not be flattened by the resource transfers engineered by AskingBristol.

At the present moment, it seems to us that this particular initiative does have the potential to do something useful, particularly by reminding universities and their students about their responsibilities to the places that they should be embedded in. There are many cities like Bristol, where a large number of the population are students, and this could provide rich and important “service” learning opportunities (Aramburuzabala *et al.*, 2019), as Hannah and James attest. Perhaps more importantly, it could also have some far reaching effects for patterns of connection and even integration across the city, but that remains to be demonstrated. At the time of writing, we have a small amount of funding to engage in version three of our project, with two more interns working with John and Martin. Building social infrastructure may need to begin with “experiments”, but if it is to be durable, it will need a business model or funding stream which allows it to grow. We think we have demonstrated its potential. Next we need to ensure that it becomes embedded and mundane, a routine part of the way that the city and its universities operate.

Notes

1. <https://askingbristol.org/stories/f/a-warm-welcome-at-eastside-community-trust-thanks-to-collecteco>
2. Grateful thanks to the editor and reviewers of the journal for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.
3. <https://populationdata.org.uk/bristol-population/>, <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-study>, <https://democracy.bristol.gov.uk/documents/s45306/App%20A%20Population%20Bristol%20Nov%2019%20Extract.pdf> (all accessed 10/22).

4. See, for example, “Bristol: A City Divided” (2017) CODE/Runnymede, <https://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/code/briefings/locaethnicinequalities/CoDE-Briefing-Bristol.pdf>, “Everyday integration during and beyond COVID-19” (2021) Everyday Integration/University of Bristol, <https://everydayintegration.org.uk/outputs>, “The Power of Community” (2022) VOSCUR/University of Bristol, <https://www.voscur.org/system/files/The%20Power%20of%20Community%20-%20Voscur%20-%20University%20of%20Bristol%20-%20February%202022.pdf>
5. <https://www.bristol247.com/news-and-features/news/bristol-tale-two-cities/>
6. See <https://brisiei.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/>
7. See <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/fssl/professional-liaison-network/>
8. Described at <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/temple-quarter-campus/research-teaching-and-partnerships/barton-hill-micro-campus/>
9. See <https://candobristol.co.uk/>, and <https://www.bristolsu.org.uk/skills-volunteering>.
10. <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/>
11. <https://askingbristol.org/stories/f/thank-you-to-accolade-wines>

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