

## Free WiFi kiosks in NYC coming to Philly with cameras, critics and lessons learned

by Rebecca Heilweil, STAFF WRITER, Posted: March 28, 2018



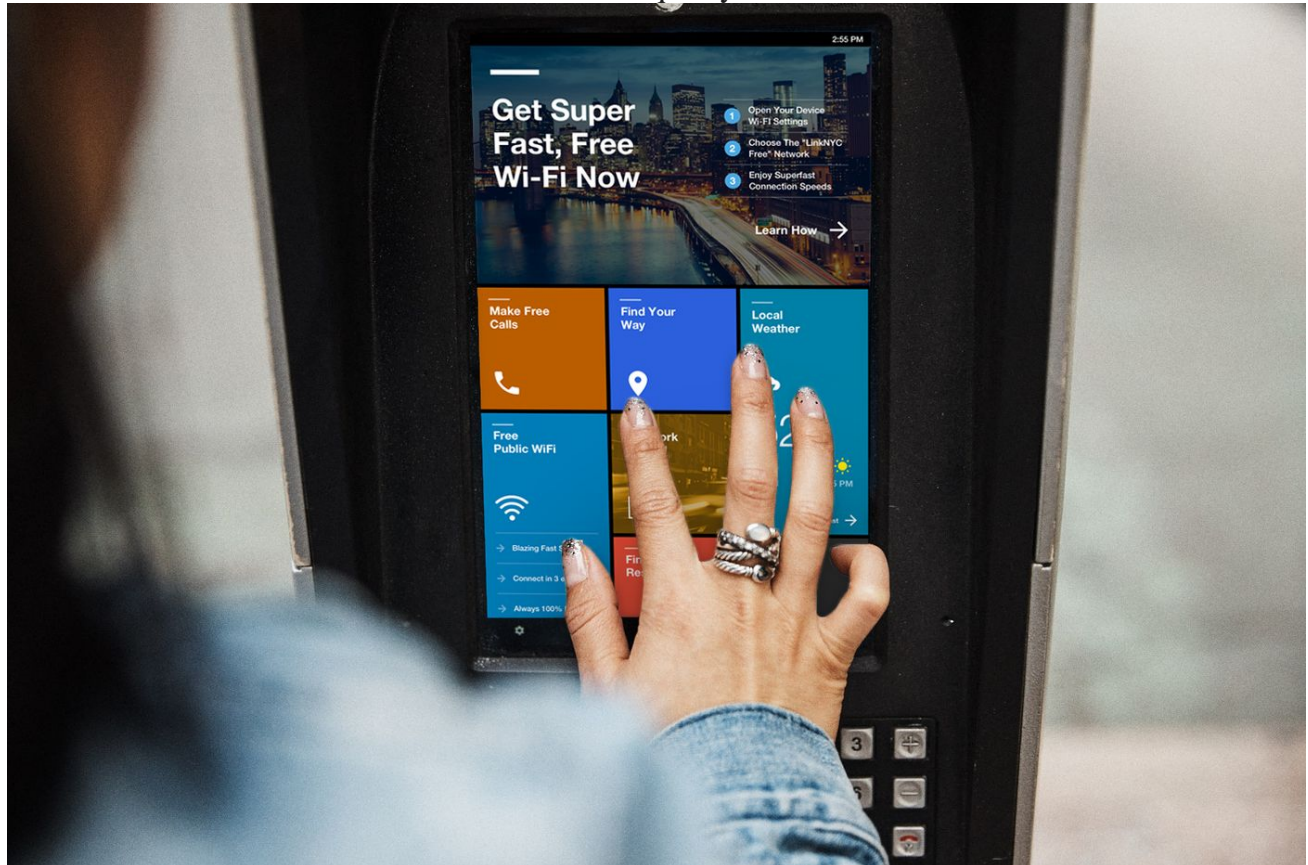
### LINKPHL

When WiFi kiosks first arrived on New York City street corners, homeless men huddled to gawk at pornography, privacy protesters taped over the machine's security cameras, and digital libertarians feared the provider was harvesting data from unsuspecting city residents.

Now, as early as September, 100 high-tech kiosks are [coming to Philadelphia](#).

Each kiosk, called a Link and provided by the Intersection media company, comes equipped with 55-inch high-definition screens for advertising and art, an encrypted WiFi network, charging ports, and a tablet for calls — all free. They've already replaced thousands of traditional telephone booths across New York City and the United Kingdom.

Links also come with three cameras, which the firm says will record passersby to discourage vandalism, and which users could activate for video calls. Intersection is also testing environmental sensors in New York that could be used to track air quality and traffic.



## LINKNYC

Close up of the tablets that Intersection installed in New York. The Philadelphia version might be a little different.

Supporters see these kiosks as just one facet of the communications technology that will build future "smart" cities. A Link, they say, can share news and information within neighborhoods, guide tourists, and help close the digital divide.

But privacy advocates say they worry about giving so much power and personal data to a private firm that's less accountable than city governments.

Eighty of the initial 100 kiosks will be placed in Center City and University City. The goal, said Ruth Fasoldt, a spokeswoman for the New York-based Intersection, is to "build corridors of WiFi for a person to be able to walk down a given street and to be connected to the WiFi for however many blocks."

The city and [Intersection](#) are to evenly split the advertising revenue — which should pay for the kiosks and then some. Philadelphia is guaranteed at least \$450,000 annually, but officials could give no estimate for the ad revenue, since the location of each Link hasn't been determined.

## Lessons learned

In New York and abroad, the rollout hasn't always been smooth.

Notably, the kiosk providers had to drop a key feature — web browsing — once they realized that it was X-rated content that users were watching. No web browsing will be offered in Philadelphia, just apps that send users to specific sites.

Last year, vision-assistance tools were added after the National Federation of the Blind sued New York City and the Link program, arguing that the kiosk tablets lacked basic accessibility features such as speech synthesizing.

In Philadelphia, the push for such kiosks first began in 2014 after Titan, a transit advertising firm, won a 20-year contract from the city. Titan has since merged with another firm to form Intersection, whose investors include Alphabet's Sidewalk Labs.

In New York City, where more than 1,400 kiosks have been installed, there are plans for at least 6,000 more. The city estimates earning about \$540 million in advertising revenue by 2026.

## New York critics

In March 2016, the New York Civil Liberties Union criticized [LinkNYC](#) for being unclear about the user information that would be retained.

At a New York hacking conference that summer, Benjamin Dean, a technology policy analyst, cautioned those who might view the kiosks as merely a public and free WiFi service. "As we know," he said, "when you're not paying, you're not the customer — you're the product."

Two citizen privacy groups concerned about LinkNYC, called ReThinkLink and NYC Privacy, sprang from that conference. A fringe group that has also seized on the issue is Cryptome, which maintains a controversial website that claimed to have published the identity of the CIA analyst who found Osama bin Laden.

The group has been video recording crews as they install the kiosks and posting the videos online.

## 'We are the users'

Intersection says police and other government agencies have made "valid" requests for kiosk data only eight times — and it provided information after only two of those requests, both in 2017.



The firm also says it does not keep video records for more than seven days, and that it does not track user viewing histories. Only some cameras are turned on, though LinkNYC would not specify how many. Fasoldt said that the camera footage is primarily used to investigate damage to the devices. Recently, "we had a garbage truck back into a Link," she said.

Philadelphia has not yet released its privacy policy, but Mike Dunn, spokesman for the Office of Transportation and Infrastructure, says that will happen before the first kiosk is installed. The city has also adopted New York's Internet of Things guidelines on how municipalities can responsibly use technology. In a 2006 referendum, Philadelphia residents approved the use of public surveillance cameras.

LinkNYC's tweaked privacy policy, which the local ACLU chapter has praised, says personal information won't be shared with other companies or third parties beyond those hired to help it provide services. LinkNYC also committed to not using facial recognition technology, and that it "will not use our cameras to track you throughout the city."

"We are trying to be extremely transparent," said Fasoldt. "We have an office in Philadelphia and an office in New York. We are the users, and we want to protect ourselves and our friends."

Fasoldt said that Intersection wants to work with residents on the privacy policy, but observed that "not only do your phones know more about you, but so does the bodega across the street."

Amul Kalia, an analyst at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a digital rights nonprofit, said that cities working with Links need to build a way for people to have a voice in the process.

"The city's priority is to be able to say, 'Hey, we brought you internet.' Intersection's is to be making money," Kalia said. "People also need to seriously ask the question if they're OK with being recorded as they're walking down the street."

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