

Digitalised Welfare: Systems For Both Seeing and Working With Mess

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Overview

- Explored the digital hurdles of Universal Credit
- Explored the food bank as an unofficial site of welfare, and questioned the extent to which it could 'plug the gaps' left by digitalised welfare
- Conducted an ethnography in a food bank and with claimant support groups

The Digital in Universal Credit

- In 2018, the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights Philip Alston - digitalising welfare is a “nationwide digital experiment” upon the “most vulnerable” in society [p.7]
- Digitalisation has not only changed the method of welfare delivery but has also substantively changed the content of welfare delivery. Risk Based Verification collects data from a variety of digitalised sources to have claimants’ welfare payment adjusted accordingly.
- The digitalisation of welfare provides the opportunity for a more strict delivery of the conditions under which welfare is accessed and provided.
- Pantazis (2016): the ‘ratcheting up of conditionality’ in Universal Credit stems from the assumption that ‘jobs existed if only people could be bothered to actively look for them,’ positioning low-paid work as simply a ‘bad choice’



Food Banks

- In contrast to UC, food banks are decentralised and local. In 2019, there were 2,000 food banks in the UK
- Work in particular communities and claimants interact face-to-face and use digitalisation for its administration and outreach.
- Food bank users are those “who have been most affected by recent welfare reforms,” particularly those with disabilities, single parents, and large family households
- Garthwaite (2016, p.35): “substantial lack of awareness of how food banks actually work and what it is they do,” and that contrary to popular belief, claimants cannot simply walk into a food bank to collect food.
- Once the food bank has received donations from the public, volunteers assist in sorting and storing food. If a person is in need of emergency food, they are assessed by front line professionals and given vouchers which are taken to a food bank to be redeemed for three days emergency food.
- Thompson et al (2018) find that food poverty exacerbates existing health problems and causes new ones, particularly in terms of “providing adequate care and nutrition to children,” due to the “lack of access to adequate fresh food, food storage and cooking facilities”



Research and Methods

- Wimbledon and Worcester Trussell Trust food bank, Southwark Know Your Rights and The Lighthouse Project
- O'Connor and Baker (2017) “distinguished by the use of participant observation alongside other methods” that “allows for researchers to share experiences with their research participants to understand and empathise with their world views”
- Findings are rooted in “immersed practice and distanced reflection.”
- Information gathering was a mix of observation, accidental encounters, and unstructured interviews.
- Followed a thematic analysis, coding data into thematic categories to identify consonances and dissonances.



Findings 1: Hurdles to Accessing in Universal Credit

1. **IT Poverty.** Many did not have access to internet at home, creating an obvious block to the first stage of applying to Universal Credit. As the Wimbledon food bank manager noted: “when the bills are racking up, WIFI is the first to go”
2. Members of the Southwark Know Your Rights group emphasised the stress of applying to Universal Credit online. The online interface of Universal Credit was described as complicated, particularly for people with learning difficulties. “If they can’t do it, how are we expected to?”
3. **No Support.** No participants felt that the limited face-to-face support from the state welfare agencies resolved issues with their online applications. “I’m in a situation where I’ve not had to go onto Universal Credit, but actually if you asked me to do it today, I am sure it will be a very hard process.”
4. **Suspicion.** Claimants see the digital hurdles of Universal Credit as part of a broader set of ‘delay tactics’ aimed at punishing anyone trying to access welfare. “It feels like the first question they ask you is: when did you start lying to us?”



Findings 2: The Logic of Food Banks

There are many steps taken before an individual accesses food parcels:

1. Food is donated at a pick-up point (such as a supermarket)
2. Food is collected and organised at the bank
3. Identified and processed clients picks up a voucher from a GP or job centre
4. Client 'trades' the voucher for a parcel at the designated bank

It was observed that digitalisation had been introduced to monitor clients but the food bank's digital make-up is more flexible than Universal Credit

Administering and managing donations is an area that needs structure and process in order for food banks to be effective in delivering their main service

On one occasion, volunteers spilled out to place unprocessed donations and prepare packages in the church hall, where recipients were waiting.

“Please get these toiletries into the stock room, there's too much temptation here as that's like £40 worth of stuff”

Conceptualisation of the service user plays out in the spatial design of the food bank



Findings 3: Community Action

There is only so much a food bank can do. For many, collecting a parcel of food chosen for you by someone else can feel demeaning and embarrassing

One respondent described how degrading it felt to receive food chosen by somebody else.

One person with a physical disability had to queue for several hours at a soup kitchen, an experience she found “dehumanising,” but felt unable to vocalise her distress because she felt she was “supposed to be grateful.”

This suggests there are real limits to how much the organisers can create positive experiences through their structuring of the space and the interaction



Findings 3: Community Action

“I go to schools and [. . .] I give them a parcel for one person. I then say: make three meals per day. You need your breakfast, lunch and dinner. Now, the parcel is good, don't get me wrong. We've got a lot of donations and we've got a lot of donors. However, making manageable foods that you would eat on a day-to-day basis is a little bit hard depending on what your parcel looks like. So, when you've got these kids telling you that one of your meals is going to be carrots - tinned carrots - with rice, and that's as good as they've got, I'm like wow this is what the clients see. It's not through a lack of wanting to do [...] it's never done maliciously. It's just what can happen when you've got through two thirds of the food.”

Discussion 1: Outsourcing Complexity

A simpler and more efficient welfare system is a worthy aspiration. Our findings indicate that in attempting to make Universal Credit simple, its digital interface does the reverse.

As the field observations and the testimonies of the food bank managers reflect, this approach to welfare occludes the messiness of poverty and the process of obtaining welfare, but does not obviate it.

Tricky identities and unusual personal circumstances are erased in the digitalised system, often unjustly declaring a person fit-for-work.

The way in which Universal Credit may push people into poverty is similarly rendered invisible to the state but is highly visible to local points of welfare delivery such as food banks.

Discussion 2: Food Banks as 'Messy' Sites

- The upshot is that food banks and community groups respond to the displaced 'messiness' of Universal Credit. In particular, food banks act as an unofficial fourth emergency service, providing "compassionate, practical support to people in crisis"
- Although access to the food bank is ultimately a mechanical process: the allocation of an inert scarce resource (food) with a relatively defined value
- The digitalisation of Universal Credit is intentionally faceless: that is a consequence of the required aura of dispassionate rationality and smoothly disembodied technical function.

Discussion 3: Lessons for Welfare Service Design

As Strong notes, the food bank space is emblematic of “the downloading of austerity onto individuals and communities,” wherein the impact of the cuts to welfare “are founded and play out”

This means that, unlike the digital interface of Universal Credit, food banks/community groups are reacting to people’s needs face-to-face whilst using digitalisation to scale the service and make it more efficient.

Whilst volunteers act with compassion and attempt to restore agency, people experiencing food poverty feel a lack of control and choice.

There are, perhaps, lessons to be learned from the face-to-face elements of food bank service provision that might be translated into digital welfare service design:

1. Choice: offering meaningful choice that service users can meaningfully action is a key challenge. The data gathered from our study sites illustrate how choice is an important means of building and maintaining self-efficacy and a sense of agency

2. Relational spaces: welfare delivery relies not only on efficient tasks but also on the relational network to support that service and through which self-efficacy and agency of service users can be engendered. A social space, digital or physical, offers a space where people can meet, not as service users or service designers, but as people sharing experiences of a system. It is a space where people can develop mutual support and co-develop responses to the challenges of accessing welfare

3. Media with meaning: a common theme across from the field studies was the importance of nice materials through which to deliver the service

Conclusion

- UC attempted to simplify the welfare state and digitalisation was an integral part of this
- This overlooked the complexities inherent to welfare, and the digital-by-default approach cuts through this ‘messiness’
- Outsourced complexity to the community
- Whilst food banks/community group have stepped in, it is not enough to ‘patch up’ the hole left by welfare cuts
- Potential to re-think digital design through an empathetic lens: is there any way that we can build a digitalised approach utilising the compassion of the food bank?