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'Brilliantly documents how the welfare state has morphed into a machine for increasing inequality and distributing wealth upwards. Ursula Huws' solutions are radical'

Paul Mason, author of *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future*

'A searing critique of how welfare cuts have hit the most vulnerable hardest – and how we can rebuild social security with new tech. A must read for campaigners and trade unionists'

Frances O'Grady, General Secretary of the TUC

'Huws outlines a new welfare agenda ... Not to be missed!'

Lynne Segal (from the Care Collective)

'Exposees the brutal exploitation of vulnerable workers'

Yaseen Aslam, President of the App Drivers and Couriers Union

During the Covid-19 pandemic, thousands of people have died unnecessarily due to decades of governmental neglect of our welfare services. Leading policy analyst Ursula Huws shows how we must create a welfare system that is fair, affordable and offers security for all. Focusing on the key issues of our time – the gig economy, universal, free healthcare and social care – Huws draws on a lifetime of research, explaining why we need to radically rethink the system from scratch. She analyses influential ideas like Universal Basic Income and argues for original initiatives such as new legislation for universal workers' rights.

Showing how the existing system is technologically outdated and unfit for modern society, she explains why we must also develop a 'digital welfare state'. This would involve a repurposing of online platform technologies under public control.

Ursula Huws is Professor of Labour and Globalisation at the University of Hertfordshire.



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REINVENTING THE WELFARE STATE

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REINVENTING THE WELFARE STATE

DIGITAL PLATFORMS AND PUBLIC POLICIES

AN URGENT CALL
TO RADICALLY
REDESIGN THE
WELFARE
STATE FOR
THE 21ST
CENTURY

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WHAT HAS HAPPENED
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DIGITAL PLATFORMS FOR PUBLIC GOOD

URSULA HUWS

called on by the first-tier triage service to investigate cases on their patch. These on-the-spot enforcement staff could also collaborate with other local bodies, including trade unions, chambers of commerce, legal and administrative institutions and organisations providing information, counselling or other forms of support to workers to provide a joined-up local service to workers.

If other examples of the reorganisation of public services are anything to go by, the most likely neoliberal 'new public management' solution to this problem would be the implementation of the first of these elements, but with few resources going to the second or the third. It must be emphasised that any genuine improvement in the enforcement of workers' rights will be impossible unless it is backed up on the one hand by strong professional expertise and on the other by well-resourced local enforcement teams.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has looked at the erosion of workers' rights and the need for a new universal charter of rights to protect them. After reviewing some of the elements that should be included in such a charter, it turned its attention to how these rights might be enforced, concluding that there are a variety of means available but that these can only be effective if properly resourced. It notes that these do not in all cases necessarily have to emanate from central government but that there is considerable scope for local action. The development of bottom-up local initiatives is the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Digital Platforms for Public Good

The solutions I have proposed so far would go some way towards addressing the problems identified in chapters 2 and 3, helping to construct a welfare state that provides a social safety net and decent employment in line with the underlying objectives of the twentieth-century model and the principles of fair redistribution and universal access to benefits and services. But if we want a welfare state fit for the twenty-first century we need to go further, to address the concerns raised in chapter 4 relating to gender equality and the provision of care to an ageing population, as well as the other great challenges facing the whole planet, most notably the challenge of the climate emergency.

THE AMBIVALENT CHARACTER OF TECHNOLOGY

In this chapter I step into some less charted territory and make proposals for using the new digital technologies not just to enhance and expand existing welfare services but also to bring into being entirely new services that can contribute to the development of a new kind of welfare state: one that not only provides its citizens with the basic services they need for decent lives but also contributes

in new ways to the improvement of work-life balance for both women and men, the creation of jobs with decent wages and working conditions and the strengthening of local economies, while also reducing waste and energy consumption.

This entails a radical rethink of attitudes to digital technologies among groups that have up to now been rightly critical of their negative social, economic and environmental impacts. I do not start from the simplistic position that technologies are necessarily neutral.

It is obvious that many technologies can be used equally for socially productive or destructive purposes. A knife can be used to prepare food or to kill somebody. Social media can be used to overcome social isolation and generate new friendships or to harass and bully. Helicopters can be used to get sick people to hospital quickly or to rain down bullets on defenceless civilians. Notwithstanding this duality, technologies may additionally also be biased in their very design to serve the interests of the dominant groups in society who commission, purchase and use them, and can often be seen to incorporate values that help to consolidate that dominance to the disadvantage of more vulnerable groups. This can be illustrated by the ways that data collected from consumers and workers may be used to target them for sales or manipulate them into particular forms of behaviour. Nevertheless, all technologies are produced by human ingenuity and human labour, and the human beings who design these systems to serve the needs of their current masters are, under the right circumstances, quite capable of redesigning them for

other purposes in the service of different masters, with different priorities and values.

DOWNSIDES OF ONLINE PLATFORMS IN THEIR CURRENT FORMS

The research I undertook into online platforms points to some serious disadvantages to workers and other users in the ways that they currently operate. First, they tend to be owned by large international corporations that pay little or no tax and put nothing back into the communities in which they operate beyond the (usually very low) earnings that accrue to the workers. Not only do these companies fail to contribute to local economies, they actively damage them, hoovering out a percentage of the value of each transaction (typically 20–25 per cent) so that it accrues elsewhere: a value that would previously have remained in the pocket of an independent worker and been spent in the local economy may now be enriching a company in California.

Second, online platforms are associated with the exploitation of vulnerable workers. This does not just impact negatively on the lives of the workers directly affected; its effects ripple more broadly across the economy, undercutting the wages and conditions of workers employed by more traditional firms operating in the same fields and contributing to a general spread of precarious working.

I could point to other detrimental effects but these two are enough to be going on with. Neither is of course unique to online platforms. There is a long history of corporate tax-dodging and exploitation of vulnerable workers

among companies that have nothing to do with digital technologies. Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly the case that the exponential expansion of online platforms, and particularly the ease with which they can hop across national borders without having to make any investment in bricks and mortar or heavy machinery, has been greatly assisted by digitalisation. Added to this has been a reluctance on the part of many policymakers to limit their growth, because new applications of technology represent ‘innovation’ and may lead to the creation of new jobs. Nevertheless, and this is the point that must be emphasised, there is nothing *intrinsic* to the use of the digital technologies that power online platforms that *necessarily* leads to these socially and economically harmful effects.

REPURPOSING PLATFORM TECHNOLOGIES FOR PUBLIC GOOD – STARTING LOCALLY

What if these technologies could be repurposed, under different forms of ownership and with different objectives governing their design, into instruments for achieving social and economic good? Chapter 4 showed a diagram illustrating the role of online platforms and precarious work in the development of a miserable vicious cycle whereby time poverty and financial poverty chase each other in an ever-intensifying squeeze on the quality of daily life, like the legendary ouroboros devouring its own tail. Could these very same technologies be used to reverse this cycle? This is the idea I explore in the rest of this chapter.

Unlike some of the other ideas discussed in previous chapters, the best place to start in developing experiments to find positive uses for platform technologies is not to introduce them from above, via central government initiatives, but, on the contrary, to root them in local communities where a range of stakeholders can come together laterally to develop solutions that take all their needs into account, solutions that they have some ownership of and commitment to, and that are democratically accountable to local residents.

This is the approach advocated by, among others, Hilary Cottam, whose book *Radical Help* argues eloquently that the neoliberal state, with its ‘new public management’ bureaucratic approach, is incapable of delivering solutions that meet people’s real needs.¹ Her alternative approach is based on recognising capabilities, developing relationships, building horizontal bridges between different organisations and remaining open to new developments. She gives examples of several local experiments in which this method has been adopted, tackling problems relating to such varied issues as social care, health, job search, education and services for the elderly.

It is precisely because of the importance of such local, collaborative, bottom-up approaches that the rest of this chapter does not present worked-out blueprints but rather a series of suggestions designed to form a starting point for open discussions at a local level – discussions that could lead to imaginative solutions tailored to local circumstances and to which local people can be actively committed, having been consulted about their development and actively involved in making them work.

For the same reason, I have not been prescriptive about how such initiatives might be organised or funded. There are many different options in each case, and how any new public or public-private platforms could be developed and managed is a matter for debate, consultation and experimentation. They will almost certainly require a kind of joined-up thinking that links services previously provided separately. In doing so, they will be in tune with current progressive ideas that seek, for example, to integrate health and care services, requiring new forms of co-operation between the NHS and local authorities. In some cities and regions they would be able to build on existing inter-agency partnerships, such as the Greater Manchester Health and Social Care partnership which includes 35 different borough councils, NHS Foundation Trusts, Clinical Commissioning Groups and other bodies, such as the regional ambulance service.²

It is possible that setting up entirely new bodies might be the best solution in some cases. Alternatively there is scope for new kinds of partnership between different public entities, private sector organisations (such as technology providers), voluntary organisations and other bodies, such as co-operatives. It would be useful here to have a variety of different pilot schemes that could be evaluated independently.

The success of any such schemes should be judged by a range of criteria including cost, efficiency, how well they meet the needs of users, how open they are to democratic scrutiny and the extent to which user groups, workers and the bodies that represent them are actively involved in their design and implementation. Where services are

complementing existing public provision, for example, it is particularly important to have the active and constructive involvement of public sector trade unions, to avoid the schemes inadvertently becoming a means of undermining existing collective agreements or casualising the workforce. If new workers are to be recruited to help deliver new public services it is important that their terms and conditions of employment match those of existing public sector workers. Thought should also be given to their training, skills certification and career development.

The most important thing, in my view, is to avoid conflicts between different local stakeholders and to find the best consensus that is acceptable to all parties. In some cases this might mean starting slowly with small pilot schemes, taking baby steps towards larger schemes while people get used to the idea of change, assess their impact and identify any unintended consequences, while leaving open options for further adjustment.

TRANSPORT SERVICES

One field in which online platforms have already made a dramatic impact is in transport services. Companies like Uber and Bolt have posed a major competitive threat to established taxi and minicab services, driving some out of the market altogether while forcing others to change their practices to make them more like online platforms in how they operate. Outside major cities like London, their expansion has also been driven by cuts in other forms of transport, such as buses.

Meanwhile, with the growth of online shopping, the privatisation of previously national postal services around the world and the incursion of new, low-cost courier companies, some using platform models, an intense competition has grown up for the delivery of goods along the 'last mile',³ driving a race to the bottom in wages and conditions for the increasingly casualised workers whose job it is to get packages to customers as quickly and cheaply as possible. There is a growing convergence here between the delivery of items that might previously have been handled by the postal service and that of other items, such as ready meals and supermarket shopping, that might formerly have been picked up in person by the customer or delivered by staff directly employed by retailers or fast food chains.

The impacts of these developments on local communities are multiple. There are more vehicles on the roads, meaning more pollution and greater consumption of fossil fuels. There is a growing pool of underpaid, precarious workers whose poor and stressed-out families are more likely to be a burden on local services and less able to contribute positively to the local economy. The global platforms and logistics companies they work for are sucking out value from this local economy while putting little back in by way of taxes and wages. Meanwhile, the very structure of the local urban landscape is being transformed. While retailers on the high streets are driven out of business, large suburban warehouses may be being replaced by smaller local depots or pick-up points in the inner city.⁴ The extension of food delivery networks, driven by the algorithms used by platforms

such as Deliveroo and Uber Eats, is leading to the development of 'dark kitchens' situated at a distance from their parent restaurants but designed to be close to potential customers. Often these are in converted shipping containers with inadequate heating and ventilation, situated in car parks, providing very poor working conditions for the chefs.⁵ Such developments not only affect the rest of the local transport sector but also reconfigure urban space and change the character of neighbourhoods.

Yet, as already noted, the technologies that underpin the online platforms do not necessarily or inevitably lead to these negative consequences. The algorithms that power the platforms allow supply and demand for services to be matched in real time. Under present conditions, this generally requires workers to be available on call to supply the services at short notice without any guarantee of work or payment. Having to wait in their own time for a task to be allocated is one of the worst aspects of platform work. But there is no reason for the supply of labour necessarily to be organised in this way. It is perfectly possible for workers to be fully paid to work clearly defined shifts and still be available to be redeployed flexibly on demand. Indeed, this is the way that most emergency services currently operate, as well as a range of other services such as the repair of malfunctioning infrastructure or appliances. In fact the larger the workforce the easier it is to ensure that there are always people on duty without requiring last-minute shift changes or expecting some workers to be on call – especially if staffing levels are set on a 'just-in-case' rather than a 'just-in-time' principle. With the supply of labour organised in this way, it becomes much easier to

respond flexibly to demands for services without exploiting the workforce – while still giving workers a choice in which hours they work.

Under different forms of management and ownership, platform technologies could be used not only to improve working conditions but also to benefit local communities in other ways. For example, intelligent planning and a reduction in competition would make it possible to optimise the deployment of drivers, reducing the number of vehicles on the road at any given time, and thereby also reducing energy consumption and pollution as well as costs.

Here are just a few ideas for ways in which platform technologies could contribute to improved transport policies at a local level.

Integration with other transport services

One possibility would be to see individual taxi journeys not as in competition with existing public transport services but as complementary to them. For example, Uber-type services could be used to transport people with disabilities from their homes to stations where they can connect with (suitably adapted) train or bus services, helping to maximise the use of these collective forms of public transport and reduce the use of cars for longer journeys.

Local online transport platforms could also be used to supplement ambulance services to transport people to and from medical appointments or day-care services on demand, without the need for inflexible advance booking systems. With appropriately trained and vetted staff they

could also be used to transport children with special needs to and from school or after-school facilities.

There is no reason why transport services provided free to those in need could not be combined with paid-for services, perhaps by using a voucher system for the free trips. This would deliver economies of scale and help with the rational planning of services, as well as making it possible for some cross-subsidy from paying customers to those eligible for free transport. If they were receiving the same level of convenience and service that they obtained previously from a private platform, it is likely that many people would choose to use a publicly or collectively managed one, in the knowledge that the portion of the fare that previously went to the global platform provider was now being spent on providing decent employment for local people, with the extra value created remaining in the local economy. Thus, for example, the vehicles that transport children to and from school could also be made available as a paid-for service to other households, reducing school-run congestion and private car use.

Centralised purchasing of vehicles for use by these alternative platforms would make it possible to ensure high environmental standards, for example by using only electric cars.

A local strategy for reorganising the 'last mile'

Many people and organisations delivering goods to homes and businesses play a contributory role in the jams of traffic clogging our streets. There are individuals on cycles, scooters or in cars, each carrying a single item

such as an important document, a pizza, or a life-saving sample of blood, sometimes bearing the logo of a courier company such as City Sprint, or a food delivery platform such as Deliveroo or Uber Eats. Then there are vans delivering packages sent via Royal Mail, or via its now-privatised competitors from other countries such as the German DHL or the Dutch TNT, not to mention the (always commercial) American UPS. Added to these are newer entrants to the market such as Hermes and Yodel. Many retailers, both online and offline, organise their own deliveries, so residential streets are also thronged with vehicles sporting the logos of companies like John Lewis, Ocado, Tesco and Sainsburys.

The incentives to customers to pick up their own goods from designated collection points testify to the difficulty of making a profit in these competitive circumstances. So, might there be an inducement to persuade at least some corporate customers to buy into alternative arrangements – arrangements that would rationalise the logistics of these multiple deliveries and reduce the number of vehicles on the road while offering decent local employment? Would it, for example, be possible for local authorities to encourage the development of a single unified fleet of delivery vehicles (using energy-efficient vehicles and employing drivers with decent working conditions), perhaps supplemented by cyclists, offering a delivery service within a designated area to take advantage of economies of scale, picking up from all local depots and delivering to all local residents using a platform-based organisational model? If it were possible to renationalise the Royal Mail and make it locally accountable and integrated with other traffic

management schemes, then this might be an alternative route to the same end, but under the present government such a development seems unlikely.

A combination of carrots and sticks could be used to encourage take up, such as offering planning concessions to companies operating good employment practices in their warehouse management, restricting loading and unloading by vehicles that are likely to be polluting, or refusal of licences to companies that do not conform to good practices. Encouraging customers to use designated collection points to pick up their goods is of course environmentally beneficial, but there will always be people who are unable to do this, for instance because they are disabled or unable to leave the home due to their caring commitments. A more integrated and joined-up system would make it possible for a public courier service to pick up goods from the nearest collection point, rather than the warehouse of origin, dramatically reducing the amount of driving or riding time per delivery, while still ensuring that they are brought to the door.

CARE SERVICES

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing us as we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century is how to restore and improve our existing public services, and to do so with a dual aim: to counter the effects of austerity, and to reverse the fragmentation and bureaucratisation of these services related to the perverse management practices necessitated by breaking their delivery down into separate units that can profitably be outsourced to private

companies (while leaving the public authorities responsible for any risks that arise).

At a time of major growth in demand for health and care services due to the ageing population, many services (such as meals-on-wheels, hospital transport and respite care) have been cut altogether or reduced to standardised formats. One example of the latter is the standard 15 minutes allowed for home care visits. This fails to meet the needs of users, some of whom may be able to manage fine without a visit at all on some days, but require much longer and more intensive attention on others, often unpredictably. It also puts intolerable strains on the workforce, who have to dash from appointment to appointment, caught between their altruistic desire to do the job well by attending to the needs of their clients, and the management-imposed imperative to meet their targets at all costs.

As already noted, there is no reason why the technologies used to order a private taxi could not also be used to organise transport to day centres or hospital appointments for those unable to use public transport. Similarly, the technologies that make it possible to order food to be delivered at short notice via a phone app could equally be used to supply ready meals for the housebound and elderly. Even more importantly, there is no reason why the technologies used to summon supermarket checkout operators or wait staff to the branch of the supermarket or coffee chain where their skills are needed could not also be used to get domestic care workers to their clients at a mutually agreeable time. Indeed, there are already a number of online platforms that claim to provide private care services to households on this basis, such as care.com, which

provides care for the elderly but also for children and pets, and childcare.co.uk, which provides babysitting services.

In the hands of clever and publicly accountable technicians, technological solutions could be found for many problems. If it is possible for existing commercial platforms to target individual users with special offers (such as two-for-one special deals, or discounts if you introduce a friend to the service), then surely it is not beyond the capability of these technicians to design, for example, a voucher system that allocates a certain number of hours of care over a set period to a particular user, with a graduated system of charges kicking in if this is exceeded.

Local care platforms

One possibility might be to develop local platforms for the provision of care work, perhaps in partnership or collaboration with existing care providers. Bringing together the relevant local stakeholders to discuss more flexible alternatives might throw up solutions that would not only give the patient more autonomy but also allow workers to put in the amount of time actually required for any given visit. For example, instead of trying to second-guess how many care appointments might be needed, why not have an app that makes it possible for vulnerable users and the partners or relatives caring for them at home to ask for help when (and only when) they actually need it?

A lot of practical details would of course have to be ironed out to make such systems feasible but they might actually be easier to solve than the problems local authorities are already grappling with trying to make ever-scarcer

resources available to an ever-expanding and needier population of people needing social care. Here we should not just consider the elderly and long-term disabled who make up such a high proportion of existing clients for social care, but also the short-term care of people newly discharged from hospital who may only need help over a short period while they recuperate.

As with other services, combining free care for those entitled to receive it from the state with paid-for services would allow for economies of scale, making it possible to set staffing levels that reduce stress for care workers and maximise their choice of shift patterns to fit with their personal lives and schedules. The precise matching of supply and demand enabled by platform technologies would also generate efficiencies, for example by reducing missed appointments.

Integration of health and care services

Online platforms could also play a role in helping to support the integration of health and social care services at a local level. For example they would make it easier to coordinate the timing of home visits from different health and care professionals, to share practical information such as dates of hospital appointments or discharges, to arrange the timing of check-ups with dentists, opticians or audiologists, and, in collaboration with local pharmacies, to organise the delivery of repeat prescriptions. If well-managed, such services could support hard-pressed local General Practitioner services and reinforce their role as central agents in a joined-up service.

Childcare

It would also be possible to use this approach for other care services, such as childcare. Imagine what a boon it would be for harassed single parents to have a certain number of hours of free childcare (provided, of course, by vetted, certified experts) per year to deal with emergencies? Again, the maximum benefits from such a scheme would arise if free publicly provided services were combined with paid-for ones. The greater the critical mass, the greater the possibility for offering a wide range of choices to users and the higher the possibility of being able to offer workers the shift choices that suit them.

A publicly provided service would have other advantages. At the simplest level, by eliminating the profit currently taken by online platforms, it would reduce the cost and enable resources to be deflected towards improving employment standards and staff benefits. It could also be managed in such a way that it is not obvious which customer is paying what, thus avoiding any stigma associated with being in receipt of free services. Furthermore, it makes it possible to offer different degrees of support tailored to the needs of individual households. Finally, it could establish high standards of safety and professionalism and, as a public body, be accountable to local communities.

DOMESTIC SERVICES

Decades of feminist research have demonstrated that probably the single most crucial obstacle to equality for

women is the 'housework problem', whereby women do disproportionately more unpaid care and household maintenance work than men, which in turn affects not only their roles in the household but also their ability to participate in paid employment outside the home. Of course, digitalisation in and of itself cannot free women from carrying an unfair share of the load of unpaid domestic work. However by offering a new range of services, affordable even to the poorest by being linked into the welfare system, online platforms could help to free up the time of both women and men and offer new choices for dealing with such things as childcare, caring and cooking for the sick and elderly, and cleaning. If these services were provided on a flexible just-in-time basis, they could be used even by people with awkward and unpredictable shift patterns, or dealing with fluctuating health conditions. In doing so, they would make a direct contribution to liberation from the necessity of performing these tasks. When combined with progressive and innovative public policies to provide a basic subsistence income, and with fair employment policies that respect the rights of both female and male workers, public service platforms could help ensure that women and men can access the labour market on more equal terms, while improving their work-life balance.

Public household service platforms

I have mentioned the possibility of combining free and paid-for services in the context of transport and care services. In relation to other domestic services, such as

cleaning and help with household maintenance, this becomes even more important because the relationship between time poverty and need on the one hand, and money poverty on the other, is not a symmetrical one. The chances are that the greater your need for help with housework the less likely you are to have the money to pay for it.

Online platforms, with their ability to make sophisticated distinctions among clients, open up the possibility of redistribution between households to make this situation fairer. There are many possible ways to do this. One model might be to offer a certain number of free hours of help in situations of demonstrable need, for example in households with young children, or where a disabled person is being cared for, assessment for which could be linked to other benefits. An alternative might be to have graduated charges related to differing personal circumstances. Another possibility could be a voucher scheme. It might be very helpful, for example, on discharge from hospital after debilitating surgery, in the first months after childbirth, or while undergoing a course of chemotherapy, to be awarded vouchers for a certain number of free sessions to get you through a difficult period.

Local businesses could also play a part. For example, employers who require certain workers to work awkward shift patterns could reward them with domestic service vouchers, or bundle services in with maternity and paternity leave packages.

As with other forms of personal service, the greater the usage of the platform the greater the scope for economies of scale and, alongside this, of improving working conditions for the workforce.

Integration with other services

Housework involves a range of different tasks including cleaning, maintenance, shopping, food preparation and care work. Domestic services could therefore be integrated with other services in a wide range of different configurations. They could, for example, be provided in partnership with existing suppliers of elder-care services, childcare services, cleaning services, household maintenance services, shopping services or food delivery services.

It is quite possible that there is no single best way of organising these services. Ideally each locality should be able to come up with its own solution, using a bottom-up approach in which local stakeholders are brought together to brainstorm and decide what will work best for their own community, building on existing strengths. Successful pilot schemes could then be rolled out more broadly.

Organisational speaking, it seems likely that the most important priority will be to ensure that any solution is accountable to local citizens. This might involve resisting attempts to impose top-down solutions either from national or international companies or agencies or from central government. It would mean giving priority to horizontal local networks over vertical ones, in which there is a risk of standard one-size-fits-all models being imposed from above, not only depriving local people of the choice to determine their own priorities but also risking a situation where the added value of these services does not accrue fully to the workers who provide them and the residents who receive them.

FOOD SERVICES

I have already mentioned using the model of food delivery platforms as a basis for providing 'meals-on-wheels' for disabled or elderly housebound people unable to shop or cook for themselves. However, integrating food provision into social care services is only one model. Food delivery could alternatively, or additionally, be integrated within a broader local food strategy.

In some parts of Britain, local authorities are already developing imaginative local food plans. One example of this is Bristol, which has developed a 'good food plan' for the city.⁶ This originated in a local initiative involving a diverse range of stakeholders including local government, community-based and business organisations.⁷ Its ambitious aims include transforming Bristol's food culture, encouraging the diversity of food retail, safeguarding land for food production, increasing urban food production, redistributing, recycling and composting food waste, protecting key infrastructure for local food supplies, increasing market opportunities for local and regional suppliers and supporting community food enterprises.⁸

Efficient distribution plays a key role in any such local strategy, not least because getting perishable goods to where they are needed quickly is important for reducing waste and ensuring high quality.

The more precise matching of supply and demand enabled by digital technologies is crucial here. This is something that will improve as networks grow, multiplying the options and introducing economies of scale. Integrated local networks, managed online, could have the

potential to link together a wide range of different suppliers and consumers in local supply chains. They could also open up markets for local producers, to the benefit of the local economy.

Just as it is possible for small-scale energy producers to supply energy to the national grid when they have a surplus, an effective local network could make it possible to link in very small-scale food suppliers, such as allotment holders, co-operatives or small enterprises making artisanal foods, to distribute their products and prevent surplus food going to waste in times of glut.

Improving food supply to local institutions

Local food networks could make it easier to ensure a supply of nutritious, sustainably produced food to local institutions such as schools, hospitals, residential care homes, prisons, universities or work canteens, either in the form of fresh raw materials to be cooked on site or as pre-prepared ready meals. They could, for example, contribute to the development of the more sustainable food policies advocated by the Department of Health,⁹ making greater use of local suppliers and thus reducing the cost and carbon footprint of transport as well as increasing freshness.

Avoiding waste while addressing hunger

Following examples such as that of the Oxford Food Bank,¹⁰ surplus food could be collected from wholesalers, supermarkets and restaurants for distribution to charities,

local kitchens or market stalls via these networks. Apart from its clear social value in addressing food poverty and redistributing food, this also has the added benefit of reducing waste. A coordinated network could contribute to a local sustainable waste management strategy by other means too, for example by ensuring that food waste is transferred efficiently to composting services, and decreasing the amount of food spoilage caused by delays in over-long or inefficiently managed supply chains.

Home delivery of food

I have already mentioned the home delivery of food in the context of reinventing meals-on-wheels and providing services to time-strapped households. However, integrating it with care services is only one option. It could equally be linked more firmly into the local ecosystem of shops, restaurants and cafes, providing an alternative to, or extension of, existing food delivery platform services. Whether they involve supplying freshly cooked food (as in platforms like Deliveroo or Uber Eats) or frozen ready meals (as supplied by companies like Wiltshire Farm Foods, cookfood.net or various supermarket chains), one of the great attractions of these new services, as compared with traditional institutional meals-on-wheels services, is the much greater range of choices available to customers.

A local food network would be able to provide such choice, for example by linking in suppliers of traditional ethnic cuisines, vegan or vegetarian options, or foods for people with specific dietary needs (such as those with coeliac disease or diabetes or on a weight-loss regime).

In the process, it could support local restaurants or other food-producing businesses while also ensuring a good range of cultural and nutritional choice for users. The 'dark kitchens' model could even be used by local authorities as a means of providing support for new food enterprises in the start-up phase. With control over the planning process, they would be able to provide for suitable premises that meet health and safety standards in the right locations. This could be a good way to help people from migrant communities put their traditional culinary skills to productive use. Not only could this support the start up of new businesses, it could also extend the range of cuisines available to local communities.

As in other cases, subsidised options combined with paid-for ones would help to generate critical mass. Wouldn't it be nice, for example, to come out of hospital in the knowledge that you have a few vouchers for free meals from your favourite kitchen to use during your recovery period? Or for parents in poverty to know that their children will have at least one nutritious cooked meal per day during the school holidays?

From dark kitchens to bright restaurants

There is no reason why food networks should be used only to deliver food from remote kitchens to people's homes. The direction could also be reversed, by using them to deliver ingredients or prepared food to places where the food can be eaten communally. Affordable community restaurants can be a vital resource for the homeless. They can also help break down loneliness and

bring together people who would otherwise be isolated in their homes, for example because of mental illness or poverty. They could complement, or substitute for, food banks, providing places where parents who lack proper cooking facilities can bring their children for nutritious cooked meals. Setting up dispersed networks of affordable restaurants in areas of food need would not just help the immediate recipients but also contribute to revitalising high streets by repurposing empty shop premises for these purposes. Again, there is no reason why low-cost meals for those in need should not be cross-subsidised by higher prices charged to customers who can afford to pay more.

ONLINE LABOUR EXCHANGES FOR THE SELF-EMPLOYED

The platform model need not be restricted to the supply of household or transport services. It could also be used to supply other forms of labour in a way that boosts local economies. For example instead of going to a platform like Fiverr, or Upwork or PeoplePerHour to find, say, a freelance graphic designer or a translator, it might be possible to use a locally based not-for-profit platform to search for such a person. Many individuals and businesses would probably be happy to do so in the knowledge that the work is going to people who live locally and will spend their earnings in the local economy, thus helping other local businesses, and that any commission taken by the platform is being spent on its maintenance and further development and the training and insurance of workers, rather than being taken as profit.

The development of such platforms could be boosted by encouraging local organisations to use them as their first port of call. For example they could be named as preferred suppliers of IT, translation, design or information services to local hospitals, police forces or other institutions. Businesses tendering to supply services to the local authority could be asked to use them in preference to global suppliers.

Such platforms would also be in a position to support the self-employed people registered on them in securing their rights to such things as pay rates that conform with living wage requirements, health and safety, trade union representation and ownership of the intellectual property they have produced. Once they have achieved sufficient scale, these platforms would also be able to set up exemplary schemes for providing benefits such as pensions and maternity, paternity or sick leave for the self-employed, as well as collaborate with local training institutions to provide work opportunities for their graduates and help them into self-employment through initiatives such as mentoring schemes.

PREFIGURATIVE MODELS

During the coronavirus crisis in 2020, there has been an enormous upsurge in collaborative activity to support vulnerable groups in local communities, much of it organised online. People have come together to make and distribute personal protective equipment, to shop for neighbours isolated in their homes, to cook and distribute food, to support vulnerable children, to provide emergency

accommodation, supplies for the homeless and emotional support for the mentally ill. This suggests that there is strong potential for a willingness to participate in further bottom-up initiatives in the future.

Even more importantly, the crisis has triggered a new wave of thinking outside the box. Alongside unprecedented challenges to the racism that permeates British society, it has also encouraged a renewed interest in economic and social alternatives, including demands for a UBI.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has sketched out some ideas for potential uses of online platform technologies to bring about a positive redistribution of social resources, improve existing welfare services and develop new services at a local level. Many of these services go beyond the aims of the twentieth-century welfare state by addressing feminist and green demands explicitly. They thus contribute to the development of a broader socialist vision. I have avoided making specific prescriptive demands, which would thwart the intention of ensuring that new services are produced in a bottom-up way that responds to the needs of local communities, and, once developed, remain accountable to these local communities and open to change by them. They are intended not as a blueprint but to stimulate local discussion and inspire the development of local solutions.