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Automating Universal Credit

Abstract

Automating Universal Credit is a study that sets out to achieve a wider understanding of the effects of automation and digitisation in social security policy through a study of the UK's Universal Credit, a social security payment. In the UK, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) now uses several algorithms to determine UC eligibility, calculate monthly benefits and detect fraud.

The project, currently in its first year, examines the automation of UC benefits in the UK through two sets of questions:

What are the political values and policies that drive the technical systems that comprise Universal Credit? Social studies of technical systems often view algorithms as complex assemblages shaped by the legal, political and institutional structures they are embedded in. (Hughes 2004, 8; Kitchin and Lauriault 2018, 3; Kitchin 2017). Through interviews with government staff, civil society and public document analysis, the project will be among the first academic studies to map and explain this system from a sociotechnical perspective, rendering this black box more visible.

How do claimants interact with automated and digital components of Universal Credit and does automation harms certain populations? While many studies of the digital welfare state to date have focused on the design and deployment of these systems, few have looked at how users themselves understand and interact with these services (for exceptions see Eubanks 2018 and Brown 2019). This study asks, what impacts do people feel automation has had on their ability to claim, access and contest payments? Which groups are more likely to experience the negative effects of automation and digitisation? How do claimants dispute decisions and exercise their right to remedy errors? Finally, how would claimants want the system designed so that it best supports their needs? Through fieldwork, interviews with staff at NGOs that work with claimants, and a series of design workshops with claimants, the project will argue for more evidence-based consultations with users to shape the automated welfare state.

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