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Article:

Bennett, Hayley and Meers, Jed orcid.org/0000-0001-7993-3062 (2025) An 'interface first' welfare state? Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law. ISSN: 1469-9621

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09649069.2025.2530873>

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An ‘interface first’ welfare state?

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Keywords Digital welfare state; interface design; administrative discretion; digital exclusion

How people interact with the welfare state – whether applying for support, receiving a service or challenging a decision – is increasingly mediated through a user interface. Whether a website, app, or online platform, Governments across the world are digitalising the front-line of welfare services as well as the back-office administration and decision-making that often forms the focus of digital welfare state research (van Toorn *et al.* 2024). Indeed, flagship digital welfare policies – like the UK’s Universal Credit system – are often ‘synonymous with [their] digital interface’ (Raso 2023, p. 164). However, this transformation of the front-line is lumpy and incomplete. Interfaces still sit alongside the face-to-face meetings, physical evidence, phone calls, letters and paper-based administration that have long characterised welfare bureaucracy – the state is increasingly ‘interface first’, but is far from ‘interface only’.

From a citizen’s point of view, this ongoing digital transformation means making and sustaining a claim can often take the form of a ‘multi-level maze’ (Bennett 2025): a patchwork of unpredictable interfaces mediating access to a range of fragmented entitlements and off-line interactions that can increase administrative burdens rather than reduce them and exacerbates digital exclusion. From a front-line worker’s point of view, their processing and decision-making is not only facing increasing automation, but also a move to platforms, where discretion can be shaped into user interface pathways that lead to ‘interface-generated outcomes’ (Raso 2023, p. 168). This shift towards what we term the ‘interface first welfare state’ fundamentally reshapes how citizens interact with social security systems, how administrative discretion operates, and how social citizenship itself is experienced and enacted (Meers *et al.* 2025).

This special issue of the *Debates in Social Welfare* section brings together five papers that examine different dimensions of this ‘interface first welfare state’. Young *et al.*’s longitudinal study of military veterans claiming Universal Credit reveals how digital-first systems can undermine relationships of trust between claimants and the state (in this case, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)). Drawing on rich qualitative data from interviews with veterans over time, they demonstrate that while online interactions through the Universal Credit journal offer advantages for some, they can create additional barriers for groups with complex needs. The research highlights how veterans often require ‘analog’ support from friends, family, and third-sector organisations to mediate their access to digital systems, and shows how the existence of DWP Armed

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Forces Champions provides a model for how targeted human support can work alongside digital contact to rebuild relationships of trust in an interface-first environment.

Brown's deep-dive analysis into Australia's Job Seeker Snapshot form provides a detailed examination of how administrative work shifts onto citizens in digital welfare systems. Using a 'form-led' approach to understand the administrative burdens created by digital processes, Brown argues that the transition to 'technology-generated' interactions fundamentally alters the citizen-state relationship by removing human intermediaries who previously helped interpret a form's often complex questions and context. The paper demonstrates how seemingly minor design decisions – such as requiring specific formatting for data entry – can create significant barriers for those lacking digital literacy, while the absence of human support means citizens, even those facing a lack of digital skills, must navigate the risks and complexities of digital welfare applications independently.

Wright et al.'s paper examining Universal Credit implementation provides insights into how street-level discretion operates within a "screen-level" policy environment. Drawing on interviews with claimants, DWP staff, and other stakeholders, they reveal that digitalisation has not eliminated human discretion but rather redistributed and reconfigured it. The research demonstrates how frontline workers use both formal and informal discretion to bridge the gap between digital policy expectations and claimant realities, while the online journal (a core feature of the Universal Credit interface for interacting with staff) creates new asymmetrical spaces for communication that extend the temporal and spatial boundaries of welfare conditionality into claimants' private lives.

Morrison's study of welfare advisors in central Scotland explores how Universal Credit's digital-by-default design creates new forms of 'digital conditionality' that reshape social citizenship. Through interviews with welfare advisors, Morrison reveals how digital access becomes a practical prerequisite for claiming benefits, despite having no legal basis, and how this requirement generates new forms of interdependent citizenship as digitally excluded claimants become reliant on informal 'digital carers'. The research shows how the digital device itself becomes a locus of power in the claims process, potentially enabling both support and exploitation within domestic and community networks.

The collection concludes with Bennett and Meers' examination of local government's neglected role in the digital welfare state. Their analysis reveals how local authorities across the UK are developing their own digital welfare interfaces for administering the smorgasbord of local welfare schemes, creating what they term a 'tale of two parts' in UK digital welfare transformation, where the highly visible national Universal Credit system operates alongside numerous local digital initiatives that receive comparatively little attention. The paper underscores the challenges local authorities face in digitalising welfare provision, including complex means-testing requirements, limited resources, and fragmented data-sharing arrangements, leading to significant variation in digital capacity and approach across different localities.

These contributions all demonstrate that the 'interface first' welfare state emerges not as a clean break from the past, but as a messy amalgamation of old and new, where digital interfaces sit alongside and mediate access to entitlement and where human discretion finds new expression through digital pathways.

While scholarly attention is understandably increasingly focusing on the rise of AI and algorithmic decision-making in welfare systems, the arguments across these papers underscore that we must not overlook the seemingly mundane yet profoundly consequential features of interface design. These dropdown menus, form fields, chat boxes, and navigation pathways – as well as algorithms – increasingly constitute the digital welfare state.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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