(End of Parliament) Wrapup to The Data Flows of Universal Credit:[1] Government desires over user needs

If you were to say there is a computer system where users are overpowered by the system designers and operators, that tells users how much money they owe without showing any detail how that figure was created, where staff for the designers can change those figures at will, and when the figures change there's no way for the users to know about it unless they keep their own independent records, and where discrepancies result in prosecutions, you may recognise a description of the Post Office Scandal. It's also a description of Universal Credit, about which we've published Annex 8.[2]

One of the precursors the 2020 launch of The Data Flows of Universal Credit was a 2019 piece we did for NESTA on the consequences of our current behaviours of governance and data. The coming election will likely form the government that was kicked out of office after the tech catastrophe setting the scene for the report. The rise of large tech doing government's bidding, and the inevitable catastrophe was depressingly prescient – Post Office Horizon, UC, NHS/Palantir from the UK, or robodebts from Australia, or the Netherlands, or whatever is next in the depressing list of power abusing the vulnerable.

In the last days of the Parliament, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee of the House of Commons report said:
> "Although statisticians and researchers publish a wealth of information on which data sources they hold, and how they are used, very little information is made available about how personal data are being used for the purposes of government analysis."
> "102. We recommend that the analysis function explore options for improving transparency around the use of personal data in official analyses, and that this work be made publicly available.
> (paragraphs 100/102)

We agree. The ONS "Integrated Data Service" is a potential pool of toxic secrecy left for the next government to address.

Another Parliament will begin in the next month, and here we look at the future data flows of universal credit and the rest of government beyond the NHS (what NHS England should do instead of FDP is an entirely different topic, but it's the same centralising thinking that they *must do everything,* the Department of Health in England see your family GP the same way Uber saw your local taxi firm). The current government is narrowing the distinction between NHS and not-NHS, with DWP taking on "sick notes"/"fit notes" assessing your health for social security purposes (the consultation originally didn't cover DHSC), or Job Centres making future decisions about "preventative" jabs? If Our Future Health leaders gets their way.

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[1] Held until nearer the 2024 election
[2] The final section of Annex 8 covers the rest of Government as much as it does DWP, and we've written a short note on what GDS/CDDO/CO should choose to do.

GDS and Gov.UK are currently building the Black App as infrastructure for the next calamity, with "JFDI" being the view of those implementing Ministerial diktats (Annex 8), as will become public about "prospective access" in due course, that harms patients.

Whatever the party affiliation, technocrats like authoritarianism purely as it makes their goals easier to achieve. People are full of contradictions that democrats must manage, and authoritarians ignore.

UC

Our work on Universal credit covered DWP and what it can and can not do with the system it has built. Only some of that policy surface has been examined because of the potential policy constraints.

UC stood up resiliently in the pandemic. As a digital first system, it coped with more than 100,000 signups an day as it became clear to people, on live TV at the nightly press conferences, that the steps to protect the economy would not protect the self-employed. For them, UC was it. People signed up in droves, often in the short window immediately after the press conference. Citizens Advice have shown some nice graphs showing traffic was predictive of UC demand.

The pandemic surge showed that the digital systems can be flexible for new needs – but that is almost only ever used to raise new barriers to access, they are only removed in emergencies. After the emergency has passed, often the innovations that help institutions remain, while those that help *people* fall away.

The "One Login" service requires working email addresses and phone numbers for every account, and users who wish to use government services will have to Verify their identity with a photograph and official ID. Reflecting the outgoing Government's fetish for unrestricted facial recognition, there are no safeguards on reuse of this data across Government, including for *mass* facial recognition. A selfie can be used in verifying yourself to claim UC, and there are no statutory protections against matching to other databases, although it's far from clear that such data is stored in an easily analysable way. Although DWP could require that all claimants must provide a new photo for "counter-fraud" purposes, with new terms which allow arbitrary reuse. Things can change if Ministers want it.

Just as UC was built to an culture and structure assumed by IDS, and gov gateway was quietly rebuilt embedding the elitist assumptions of Treasury or HMRC,[3] new services are designed to minimise take up, while the institutional racism and lip service to good governance typical of the Home Office is embodied in One Login. Things only change if Ministers want it.

The Cass Review was implemented in about 30 seconds, Windrush Review begriduingly accepted then abandoned. Things only change if Ministers want it.

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[3] https://twitter.com/yasgeorgiou/status/1681414523788378129?s=

Save money and abolish the five week wait at the same time

The ideological commitment to a 5 week wait can be replaced with a process that shows understanding of the real world. Design and funding decisions that assume and enforce the five week wait can be engineered out within the context of a Spending Review.

DWP can leave a bill on file, in a way which turns the multi-day lookup process into an instant lookup in that new system. There go several of the 5 weeks the current government is committed to making people wait, and save millions too. Who Owes What is a way to use modern systems to avoid the surprise demands for money currently made at the time where people are at their poorest – when they start engaging with the welfare system.

DWP spends untold[4] sums per year maintaining old systems and databases, at exorbitant expense, just to be able to reclaim £50 from someone who may or may not owe it from back in the 1980s. A Spending Review should recognise that as fiscally insane, and export all data on those who it believes owes meaningful money (or all those who are not known to be dead), and then to shut down those old expensive systems, with legislation ensuring that no one can be prosecuted by a future overzealous DWP for information DWP has chosen not to keep for financial reasons.

DWP culture is covered extensively elsewhere by those who are directly affected by it.

Institutional Culture breaks databases and then breaks people

Systems merging the accountability of Dominic Cummings and the attention to detail of Boris Johnson persist from their time in government and have empowered the worst aspects of the State. Like ID cards, bad ideas never die.

Government can really screw up records and blame the victims for those mistakes: Windrush landing cards, Fujitsu/Post Office, Immigration records merge, and more, plus the imposition of Palantir on the NHS, and the TPP racism mess, PPE procurement, the failure to call some eligible people for covid boosters in 2022, the announcement of the failure to call women for cancer screening, etc, etc. Digital doesn't necessarily make things better.. Are the new Government going to do better?

In the NHS, national digital services will result in the enshittification of GP services, and the enshittification of everything else NHS England touches.

Both major political parties are committed to large systems that force the world to fit in their data schema, with no conception of real world complexity.

Databases get used however people in charge want

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[4] DWP knows; it just doesn't say.

Labour's Shadow Health Secretary ranted in a speech that the NHS must put all the data into Palantir so anyone anywhere can access it for any reason, and anyone who disagreed was [dismissed] as "vested interests" or "conspiracy theorists".

A day later the news broke that Princess of Wales's records were [unlawfully accessed]. The Princess presumably has people who check access to her records; most NHS patients don't get anything. Individuals have no way to tell, because NHS England are institutionally incapable of recognising the abusers in their midst, and so take no steps to protect patients from them.

Government argues the safeguards for accessing records are perfect, the same way Government punished the innocent Windrush as criminals, and punished the innocent subpostmasters as criminals, etc. Given the choice between checking the records or just blaming an individual, an institution will always protect the institution and blame the human, to the extent of putting them in jail and defending the indefensible long after it is evident that the system is wrong, because that requires admission of a mistake that caused harm. Post Office, DWP, and the Department of Health in England epitomise the failure to admit harms.

The systematic reduction of governance safeguards over the last decade will allow the new government to use data largely how it chooses, with commitments to transparency reliant upon the good chaps theory of government.

The Black app

The NHS has the NHS app, and the rest of Government wants "gov.uk" app for public services – the black app.

Superapps will have consequences which are unlikely to be "super" for the people who the culture of UC and other data projects already fail. We cover the specifics of those topics in [Annex 8]. The UK Government has already made one decision that an app should refuse to work at all unless you give it all the permissions it "requests" – the English covid19 tracking app did not work if you restricted it; the Scottish app worked just fine without unnecessary features. The Ukrainian [Diia] app, upon which the Black App is modelled, restricted access to services if their databases suggested you should have been conscripted but weren't shown as serving. These denials are decisions written into the code of the software, code that the public may not be allowed to see, written by developers who are told to JFDI. It may not be to anyone's benefit for Rishi Sunak's face to be on the splash screen for the app, but Ministers get what Ministers want. (see [Annex 8])

If you're on UC, the Black app may require access to enough sensors that it can tell if you got too drunk last week, or if you walk too far or too fast for your PIP claim to continue. The powers of sensors are limited only by the imagination of the punitive state.

A new government of an entirely different colour changes those constraints, but they are all political choices.

The centralising fetish of the British State

The pandemic drove adoption of the NHS 'blue app' – it being necessary to enter another country, or, for a while, to enter a nightclub. Ministers (of all parties) now wish to move more functionality into the app on your phone. That your phone can measure your steps each day means the Department of Health in England wants to be able to access that data to "get people back into work". That's not an NHS function, but the app is already installed so Ministers are opportunistic.

Coming soon is the "gov.uk" 'black app' – which will become the entry point to Government on your device.

When interaction with Government is through "One Login" and one app on your phone, how lawful is it for Government to says it knows something on one screen of the app, and deny it knows it on another screen of the same app and punish the citizen for the disconnect?

If you give location access for any one feature of the Black app, then that permission is available to the entire app, including potentially to DWP, the Home Office, and beyond. If you fill in a form on one page, how is the citizen to know that not everywhere in Government has the information. DWP knows someone is a carer, and knows how much they earn, and pays them carers allowance, but still threatens to prosecute carers (and actually does) for them being paid too much by DWP based on earnings DWP already knows.

HMG has placed disclosure obligations on school teachers about safeguarding – tell one teacher they must report it and a process kicks in – but how will those same obligations apply to the black app over time, for the same reasons? If you tell one bit of Government about a thing, do you get prosecuted for not using the same app and login to fill in an almost identical form? Probably.

Choices that endure

The "I alone can fix it" mentality underpinning Dominic Cummings' world view, the outlook of the Blair Institute, and Donald Trump, may work for a small topic in particular trouble. Caring more than anyone else about Brexit or ID cards can deliver for a time, but it can not endure.

The data projects that endure are those where everyone wants them to continue – everything will get horse-traded away at some point, and pet projects of departed leaders have limited political capital left for the same reason that billionaire tech bros can't understand why not-for-profits exist – they know their companies will one day be little more than reference material on a library shelf (hosted by a not for profit; the real world equivalent of a .com that now only exists in the Internet Archive's wayback machine), right next to the pile of reviews that failed to stand the test of time, where the only detail remembered is the eponymous Review.

It appears that the 2020 pandemic the main looting of the public was money. The next emergency will let creeps be creepier – the Ukrainian Diia app helped the Ukraine fight their

invaders, but two years on, that same mandatory app [froze the bank account](#) of those not serving when thought to be eligible. The Black App could be coded to do the same?

Kate Bingham's [Ramones lecture](#) talked about Peacetime vs Wartime. Departments always think it's wartime, and many in the Department of Health in England can not tell the difference any more, and the stagnation in staff offers no short term resolution. There is a temptation across much of government and the NHS – in ONS and NHS England especially – to bring all data entirely in house and do everything itself because no one else can be trusted to do anything. In the next crisis, NHS England and ONS will be overwhelmed as DHSC were, and the cycle of centralisation / decentralisation will roll once again.

It's one lesson, but the wrong one.

Dominic Cummings [said](#) DHSC was a "smoking ruin" when covid hit – one expects the health department to be exceptionally stretched during the initial stages of a pandemic (and one should be more worried if they weren't) but that is the basis of mutual aid and solidarity. BEIS could host the vaccine taskforce because it was less busy, and had some of the same expertise. That's what *should* happen in a functional government. Expecting otherwise is the centralising fetish inherent in the British state and "I alone can fix it". And that culture now wants an app, and the new government [will be in office in the time period we wrote about here](#).

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