

OUR ECONOMY: OPINION

The crisis of care.com

Platforms are reorganising the way we care for each other. But on-demand apps won't plug the holes in our broken social infrastructure.

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Over Christmas, the Deliveroo app was offering ‘midwives’ alongside Wagamama and Dixy Chicken. The promotion had a photo of a nurse checking a baby in an incubator, a 4.8 out of 5 rating and a dodgy pun on ‘delivery’.

This turned out to be part of a Christmas advertising campaign that aimed to “shine a light on everyday heroes” – the underpaid, overworked hospital staff holding up our collapsing social infrastructure.

If platforms like Deliveroo really care about carers, they could pay their workers enough to feed their kids, provide sick pay and parental leave or even just pay social security contributions. But this seems unlikely given a large part of their business model is based on avoiding these costs.

Deliveroo isn’t the first platform to spot an opportunity to profit from care work. In the past ten years, we have seen a growing industry of digital platforms (including Care.com, Handy, Taskrabbit and Helpling) designed to mediate the work – known as ‘reproductive labour’ – traditionally performed by women for low or no wages. These tasks include birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family, cooking, cleaning, shopping and repairing.

Not just men on wheels

A large study of platform work by Ursula Huw in 2017 found that 23.8% of UK households purchase household services from online platforms at least once a year. Until recently the mainstream story of the platform economy has been one of ‘Uberisation’, focusing on the largely male ride-hailing and delivery workforces. This has erased the experiences of huge numbers of women and migrants doing low-income home service work through platforms.

Dalia Gebrial argues that changes to working relations brought about by digital platforms are fundamentally structured by racialised and gendered histories of

labour in these sectors. This is reflected in Mateescu and Ticona's interviews with nannies, cleaners and elder care workers which draw attention to new forms of digitally-enabled abuse and discrimination. Niels Van Doorn has also identified barriers to worker organising within platformised domestic work, including the fear of increased visibility for those with insecure immigration status, and the feminised guilt involved in striking from care.

The rise of these platforms since the financial crash has taken place not just in the context of a crisis of work, where employment is increasingly precarious and low-paid, but also a crisis of care. Uber's business model involves exploiting gaps in underfunded public transport infrastructure, testing on-demand mass transit in cities across America. In the same way, care platforms seek to plug the care deficit created by the dismantling of public services; people working longer hours for less money; and a housing crisis that has ripped apart neighbourhood networks of care.

Who's holding the baby?

The UK's childcare sector is a good illustration of the way the 'platformisation' of certain types of work plays a role in wider social and political agendas such as austerity and privatisation. Over a third of families in poverty in the UK are forced into debt to pay for childcare, as fees have gone up three times faster than wages since 2008. 17% of childcare providers in the UK's poorest areas are facing closure and 'top-up fees' for nappies, meals and trips mean that the 15-30 hours of free childcare has never really been free.

As the government actively discourages local councils from providing childcare, we have seen a proliferation of for-profit global 'super chains' in the sector. One of the UK's fastest growing is Busy Bees, which currently cares for 50,000 children in over 500 nurseries. With a Canadian pension firm as their majority shareholder, the chain has a strategy to "accelerate global growth, opening settings in China, Singapore, Malaysia, Canada and the US". Aggressive expansion may be good for business, but it's disastrous for building sustainable social infrastructures like nurseries. When Australian company ABC Learning Centres (who previously owned Busy Bees) had similar ambitions to go global in 2008, it got itself into so much debt that it collapsed.

Busy Bees' main rival, private equity-backed Bright Horizons, is looking to expand not just geographically but also into other services. Last year, Bright Horizons acquired a platform called My Family Care that "combines innovative technology and practical solutions for the modern workplace". They partner with IBM, Procter and Gamble, and hundreds of other companies to book over 50,000 days of care a year for their employers.

Another company, Care.com, has also branched out into 'back-up care' with a new service called care@work offering big employers access to their global pool of 12 million care providers through their mobile app or website.

What is striking is how these childcare platforms explicitly promote themselves as a silver bullet for the crisis of social reproduction. The care@work website describes the challenges faced daily by families across the UK when caring arrangements break down and there is no state-sponsored safety net: "School is closed. A child is sick. A parent breaks a hip. The nanny goes on vacation. A spouse has surgery. Life happens." The pitch to these companies is that unexpected caring responsibilities damage productivity ("productivity wants up, absenteeism wants down and top talent wants in") and therefore damage profit. This is framed as a feminist project, a way of "promoting more women to leadership positions."

The issue is that back-up care platforms don't actually tackle the risks that arise when caring arrangements break down. They just shift that risk onto working class migrant women on zero hours contracts with no protections who struggle to look after their own kids and elderly relatives. Feminist 'empowerment' isn't about rich women working longer hours so they get promoted to senior management – it's about people of all genders, class and race having more time to take on caring responsibilities.

Platforms can exacerbate exploitative working conditions in the care sector, but they also have implications for the quality of care. As platforms closely monitor and track workers, care work becomes more task-focused and quantified, making it harder to meet the needs of individuals. The 'on-demand' model where an algorithm matches you with a stranger also makes it harder to develop longer-term caring relationships which are vital to quality care, both for children

and adults.

No tech solutions to social problems

Increasingly, researchers and policymakers are paying attention to the rise of platforms for reproductive work, but it is a mistake to assume that recommendations for how to improve the lives of these workers must be digital too. By focusing on technical tweaks to the platform design (for example, two-way rating systems or an hourly wage), campaigns often fail to situate these changes within a broader social and political agendas.

Recommendations should instead start with the systemic changes needed to tackle the crisis of care: universal free care provision, collective sectoral bargaining for care and domestic workers, a shorter working week, and more. Only then should policymakers ask what role digital technologies might play in making these changes happen.

Case studies such as the Ugly Mugs app, designed by sex workers to identify dangerous clients, the digitised Buurtzorg model of community care in the Netherlands, or the platform cooperatives being built by the Self Employed Women's Association in India offer a blueprint for this. There is nothing wrong with platforms themselves, but there is something seriously wrong with platforms that introduce extractive business models to our caring relations.

Caring futures

In the case of Uber, we know that the company's ambitions go beyond merely plugging gaps in patchy public infrastructure – it wants to have strategic control over the design and organisation of that infrastructure. The same seems to be true of care platforms. Care.com has already attempted to influence regulations in America with the establishment of the Care Institute which aims to “leverage the company's data and reach to drive systemic change across the care economy as a whole”. Their expansion into training programmes (including digital skills training) aims to increase standardisation and quality of employment, but it will also put them in a stronger strategic position to roll out

their gig economy model across the sector.

Back in the UK, the Scottish government recently funded Care Sourcer, a carer comparison and matching site, to partner with the NHS on care provision. They claim to be “tackling one of society’s greatest challenges” with technology that “has the potential to scale and transform the care sector”. This is part of a broader trend of the public sector becoming increasingly reliant on private tech firms to run ‘smarter’ essential services (from transportation to criminal justice) because they lack the expertise or resources to develop the software on their own. This kind of digital outsourcing often goes under the radar but it is just another chapter in the stealthy privatisation of public services that has been going on since the 1980s.

Political theorist Langdon Winner sees technologies as “a way of building order into our world”. This can help us think about the way that digital platforms introduce a new structuring logic to our reproductive arrangements as a society. If that platform is owned by a venture capital backed company looking to make as much money for shareholders as possible, it will inevitably restructure these arrangements in a way that makes it possible to accelerate the marketisation of care.

This is what venture capitalists do – they speculate on our futures. They place bets on particular technologies and business models by guessing (and therefore shaping) what our lives will look like in ten or twenty years. In the struggle over social reproduction, if we want to reject their version of the future, we also need to start speculating.

Silicon Valley start-ups may have realised there is ‘money in mums’. But there is also power in mums, just as there is power in grandparents and other unpaid carers, in home care workers, in nursery staff and in nannies, if we organise to build a collective voice in the fight for care.

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