

Emanuele Menegatti

University of Bologna, Italy

e.menegatti@unibo.it

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2286-5358>

Can a Basic Income Make the Digital Revolution More Sustainable and Inclusive?

Abstract: We are currently unsure whether the digital revolution will herald the end of work or whether it represents another evolutionary phase, similar to previous industrial revolutions. However, the changes in work brought about by AI and automation are already exerting negative impacts on both employment and people's income. In this context, this article delves into the potential role of social law in mitigating these adverse effects. With this objective in mind, the author advocates for a departure from our current model of social inclusion in favour of broader income support mechanisms. The author expounds on how a universal basic income could contribute to steering the digital revolution with the aim of facilitating a more inclusive and effective transition into the digital era.

Keywords: digitalization, income, social law, universal basic income, work

Introduction

Throughout history, concerns about job losses to technology have been recurrent. In recent years, these concerns have gained traction, as many academics and analysts argue that 'this time is different'. AI and robotics are now seen as threats not just to routine jobs, but also to non-routine and even creative occupations. The number of 'techno-pessimists', who predict a bleak future with unprecedented mass job destruction, is rising (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014; Sung, 2018). Among them are Frey and Osborne (2017, p. 254), whose prediction that 47% of total US employment is at risk of automation (over an unspecified number of years) went viral on the web, creating much concern.

However, there are still some ‘techno-optimists’, who argue that automation will merely transform jobs rather than entirely replace them (De Backer et al., 2018; Jäger et al., 2018). According to these optimists, predictions about the end of work fall into the ‘lump of labour fallacy’, which falsely assumes that there is a fixed amount of work in an economy. They argue that techno-pessimists fail to consider that technology is creating new jobs and professions (for instance, big data architects or computational linguists) and that many jobs cannot be wholly automated.

Currently, it is challenging to determine whether we are approaching the end of work or merely another evolution akin to previous industrial revolutions. However, some pessimistic predictions are manifesting:

1. While an era of technological unemployment may not be imminent, structural unemployment caused by automation is evident. This shift is not as pronounced when examining unemployment rates alone, but becomes evident when considering the decrease in working hours, particularly in developed countries. This trend is accentuated by the increasing casualization of work; involuntary part-time, fixed-term contracts and on-call jobs are on the rise (Susskind, 2022).
2. The availability of employment opportunities is also impacted by growing skill mismatches. Technology often demands new skills that many displaced workers lack (Guo et al., 2022).
3. To date, automation has largely amplified work pace and surveillance. Algorithmic management paves the way for aggressive managerial tactics, leading to worsening work conditions, including wage reductions (Adams-Prassl, 2022). A corresponding adverse effect arises from competition between humans and robots, where humans accept inferior working conditions to deter employers from automating processes.
4. While automation boosts productivity and profits, the distribution of the wealth generated from it has been lopsided (Prettner and Strulik, 2020). Major corporations are reaping the primary benefits, exacerbating income inequality (Eubanks, 2018).

All these factors undoubtedly have a detrimental effect on workers’ incomes. This leads to heightened economic insecurity for many, exacerbates inequality and social injustice, and restricts freedom.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role that social law might play in mitigating the effects of automation, with the goal of fostering a more inclusive and effective digital transition. To this end, I posit that our current, long-standing, work-centred model of social inclusion should be replaced by broad-based income support mechanisms such as a universal basic income. I will argue that introducing such a basic income could be pivotal, not only in providing a social safety net, but also in encouraging dignified and more productive employment in the era of digi-

tal transformation. I will then delve into the political feasibility of such basic income proposals in my conclusions.

1. Moving beyond the ‘work–social insurance’ combination

In response to the challenges presented by the digital revolution, there is a pressing need to redefine the predominant twentieth-century model of social inclusion. Historically, particularly in developed countries, the state has perceived work as the primary avenue for social inclusion. Engaging in productive employment has been both a right and a duty. Consequently, social protection has predominantly targeted those incapable of working, often through contributory and conditional social insurance schemes (Dumont, 2022). Reciprocity remains central to welfare interventions, with most schemes requiring beneficiaries to work or actively seek employment in exchange for benefits. Especially in developed nations, non-contributory social assistance typically supplements social insurance, serving to bridge its shortcomings; it compensates for the state’s inability to guarantee employment for all. In essence, the model for social inclusion is heavily anchored around the working individual.

This model was effective during eras dominated by standard industrial employment (with stable, full-time positions). However, it has proved glaringly insufficient in addressing the nuances of open and flexible economies, particularly those transformed by the digital revolution. Today, it is evident that employment is not universally accessible, despite concerted efforts by numerous national governments. Employment strategies, workfare policies, and public work programmes often fall short of their objectives. More often than not, they inadvertently push individuals into unstable employment, hindering their job search or training opportunities (see below). Concurrently, social protection systems are failing to shield a growing number of vulnerable individuals. Deficiencies in coverage, exacerbated by poor coordination among fragmented social security schemes, are becoming more pronounced. This primarily affects individuals from the middle class, who often do not qualify for social assistance but cannot afford social insurance either. The pandemic revealed the vast numbers exposed to economic downturns, with many inadequately covered by either social insurance or assistance schemes. This group includes independent contractors, individuals who have resigned voluntarily, first-time jobseekers, and precarious workers with limited contributory records.

A paradigm shift in our approach to social inclusion is imperative. The focus should shift from work – and wage-centric strategies to broader income support schemes, where basic security is not tied to employment status. John Rawls, in his later writings, advocates for a ‘social minimum’ to be universally provided, irrespective of contributory history (Rawls, 2001). True freedom – enabling individuals

to make informed decisions about their lives and achieve comprehensive social, political, and moral inclusion – can only be realized through ensuring income security.

2. Which instruments? Guaranteed minimum income v. universal basic income

Income support can manifest through various mechanisms: negative income tax, tax credits, subsidized food and vouchers, guaranteed jobs, employment and workfare policies (Gentilini and Grosh, 2020). However, two of the best-known non-contributory tools designed to combat poverty are the guaranteed minimum income (GMI) and the universal basic income (UBI). GMI offers means-tested and conditional benefits aimed at providing working-age households with adequate income to stave off poverty. In contrast, UBI is extended unconditionally to all members of a particular political community. Thus, it is not dependent on an individual's income level, employment status, or other metrics typically used to determine eligibility for social security benefits.

While variations of GMI are prevalent across Europe and globally, UBI remains a fascinating theory. It has only been implemented to some extent in places like Alaska and through certain local and temporary pilot programmes (e.g. Finland, the Netherlands, Scotland, Ontario, South Korea, and several cities). Yet these pilot initiatives have not provided decisive evidence supporting or refuting the merits of UBI, primarily because many were not appropriately structured to address relevant concerns about basic income policies or to corroborate the benefits that UBI proponents espouse (Chrisp and De Wispelaere, 2022).

The well-known Finnish experiment is a case in point (Hiilamo, 2022). Targeting only those on unemployment benefits, it existed within the ambit of an already generous social security system. A glaring shortcoming was its pronounced emphasis on 'activation', mandating recipients to accept job offers or risk benefit withdrawal. Such conditionality deviates from genuine basic income policies and essentially compromised the experiment's outcomes. Similarly, the Alaska Permanent Fund does not epitomize true UBI. The distributed sum, although spread evenly among the populace, does not satisfy basic needs (constituting no more than 7% of an individual's annual income) and lacks consistency (Zelleke, 2012). In contrast, the Ontario Basic Income Pilot Project closely mirrored UBI principles; the sole deviation was reducing the benefit by 50 cents for every dollar earned via employment. Yet this did not negate the results. The pilot demonstrated tangible improvements in participants' physical and mental health and overall well-being, without inducing mass job abandonment. On the contrary, most beneficiaries continued working; a minority scaled back their working hours for family care or training pursuits (McDowell & Ferdosi, 2020).

Despite the Ontario pilot's revelations, the majority of experiments which have been conducted remain inconclusive regarding the paradigm shift under discussion, as could be anticipated. Thus, the discourse around UBI remains predominantly theoretical, although insights supporting UBI can be gleaned from other methods of distributing monetary support, many involving GMI. These experiences underscore how, in contrast to the universal and unconditional payments which UBI proposes, means testing and the imposition of conditions often lead to negative incentives to work, potentially fostering deceptive behaviour (such as engaging in simultaneous undeclared work); steep administrative costs and consequent burdens on claimants; the stigmatization of recipients, which jeopardizes social cohesion; low take-up rates in many countries as a result of stigma, complexity, fear, and even ignorance; and pressure on people to take precarious and low-paid jobs that are often not in line with their skills (Standing, 2017, pp. 193–196; Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017, pp. 7–9).

Undoubtedly, arguments against UBI are numerous. Foremost is the seeming paradox of allocating money to everyone and not solely to the poor, unlike with GMI. However, there is a long history of strong moral and economic arguments which can provide justification for this. UBI, more than GMI, serves as an instrument to actualize social justice. As Thomas Paine articulated in the late 18th century, UBI offers a means to equitably distribute profits that come from communal resources (Paine, 1797). Contemporary economists like Guy Standing emphasize UBI's function in compensating everyone for their contribution to the global economy (Standing, 2017, pp. 44–45). Just from being active on the internet and social networks, people bolster the earnings of big tech. We all contribute to the creation of a kind of collective intelligence that is exploited for the profit of a few. Philippe van Parijs has intriguingly assumed that we owe a great deal of what we earn to the inventiveness of other people, including our predecessors, more than to our own efforts (so-called social inheritance) (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017, pp. 4–28). We also owe it to external circumstances, such as the school we attended, the boss and the people we had the chance to meet, knowledge of the right first language, and so on. Such variables support the case for redistributing a portion of our 'unmerited' earnings within our political community.

In playing its distributive function, UBI is able to deliver positively to society, the labour market, and the economy. From a social perspective, its universality amplifies solidarity, entailing a sense of belonging to a community and overcoming the social stigma of subsidies for those living on welfare. It also realigns intra-household power dynamics by channelling funds to individuals rather than only to breadwinners. Concerning labour markets, UBI's non-selectivity and its obligation-free structure empowers individuals, boosting their capacity to make free decisions. This empowerment is pivotal in counteracting the adverse ramifications that minimum-income schemes typically inflict upon labour markets. Means testing gives

disincentives to work: it is not convenient to take up jobs when there is a unit-by-unit replacement of benefits within the total household income, which can result in net income reductions when job-related expenses (e.g. commuting and meals) are accounted for. Furthermore, accepting a job may also not be convenient, considering the complex administrative procedures to re-claim benefits once the worker becomes unemployed again. Conversely, if the benefit is for everyone, independently of the level of household income, people are more likely to accept jobs without fear of losing the benefits; this avoids the so-called unemployment trap. Its opposite, the employment trap, is nullified by the unconditional nature of UBI – without any employment prerequisites or clauses regarding availability on the labour market (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017, p. 64). Individuals can refuse or quit bad jobs and can decide to look for another job or invest in skill enhancement. Moreover, they might opt for unpaid yet productive engagement within their home or community. Young people, upon finishing their education, are not constrained to gaining an income; they can explore unpaid internships or further education.

From economic and public-finance perspectives, a basic income is simpler, cheaper, and faster to manage than a minimum income or other means-tested and conditional tools, so entail huge savings in state budgets (Dumont, 2022, pp. 304–308). It boosts the purchasing power of people on low incomes, with a positive impact on aggregate demand and thus GDP. This, though, is the main argument against UBI: as one can easily imagine, this revolves around its economic viability. The estimates are staggering, and emphasize its utopian nature. However, perhaps this problem should not be overestimated, as it could be temporary; in the medium to long run, UBI has the potential to pay for itself due to the economic growth it could stimulate. Additionally, improvements in people's health and well-being associated with UBI, as evidenced by the Ontario pilots, could reduce spending on health and social services (Ferdosi et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, researchers have presented several ways to ensure a UBI's sustainability (Ter-Minassian, 2020), including savings on the administration of means-tested programmes, cutting regressive policies (such as fossil fuel incentives), introducing new taxes (such as a carbon tax, a land value tax, wealth and inheritance taxes, a tax on financial transactions, or a tax on robots), and primarily, increasing income tax rates for each income bracket. Such an increase would likely be marginal in developed countries (around 2–3%) and considerably higher in developing countries, given their tendency towards low taxation even for high incomes.

A significant dilemma concerns the possibility of utilizing the resources allocated to existing public assistance and social insurance programmes. Should the current welfare budget be distributed across the population to ensure a basic income or be added to it? In the former scenario, many individuals might end up worse off, as they would receive less income than they currently do through welfare benefits. Adding current welfare benefits to a basic income could prove too costly and pos-

sibly excessively generous, not aligning well with the goals of UBI. Hence, it seems more appropriate to consider a partial basic income, set below the poverty line, which could be supplemented with certain welfare benefits (such as state pensions and housing benefits). In other words, as proposed by some, it should function as an unconditional safety net, replacing only existing benefits that are lower than it, especially social assistance programmes. It could be then complemented by insurance benefits and other conditional non-contributory supplements (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017, pp. 167–170).

This combination is a way to achieve truly universal coverage, in terms of liberating people from need. Unless its amount is set above the poverty line, which might render it unsustainable for public budgets, a basic income alone is insufficient to ensure that the neediest individuals receive the support required to address their wider range of vulnerabilities and necessities. It is not worth establishing a level of UBI benefits based on individual need, as this would convert UBI into a means-tested benefit, thereby forfeiting the advantages, primarily its simplicity, that its universality affords. However, this does not preclude the possibility of complementing it with more tailored interventions for those in more dire circumstances.

3. A new paradigm for social inclusion: UBI and the right to work

There are numerous arguments to suggest that UBI could be the most suitable welfare programme to effectively support people's income, especially in light of the digital revolution. Building on these considerations, we can now delve into the aforementioned paradigm shift for social inclusion. As previously emphasized, governments tend to emphasize work (at any cost) as the means to promote social inclusion, considering social security as a residual option only for those unable to work or to find employment despite their efforts. This underlying assumption places great importance on work, as it not only provides individuals with their livelihood but also bestows essential values such as a sense of accomplishment, belonging to society, freedom, self-esteem, and the approval of others. In essence, it upholds human dignity, which is often denied to those dependent on welfare and can lead to feelings of humiliation. Job creation programmes and workfare policies have been grounded in this strong preference for work, operating under the assumption that any form of employment is preferable to relying on subsidies. Nevertheless, these programmes have historically failed to yield significant results. Predictably, the employment they have offered has often been temporary, characterized by low wages and unfavourable working conditions that frequently did not align with the skills and aspirations of the workers. This situation is very far from the self-esteem and freedom that work is meant to provide. Such programmes ended up being as degrading as living on welfare, resembling a form of coerced employment or forced labour. From an economic

standpoint, conscripting poorly motivated workers under unfavourable employment conditions often resulted in negative net productivity (Standing, 2017, pp. 203–207; Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 2017, pp. 46–48).

The importance of the values associated with work is undeniable. However, what seems increasingly inappropriate is the persistence of a 20th-century work-centric ethic that asserts that productive employment is the only acceptable means of contributing to society – especially when such employment fails to provide an adequate income, leading to frustration and humiliation. This stance lacks support from a suitable interpretation of the right to work. A glance at the definition outlined in Article 23(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights suffices: ‘Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work, and to protection against unemployment.’ Hence, the right to work must be guaranteed, based on two conditions: firstly, a free choice of employment. This entails the right to have a job rather than facing unemployment, obliging governments to do their utmost to promote or create employment. It also encompasses the freedom for individuals to select their occupation without constraints or coercion. Given the growing significance of unpaid work activities in the economy and in society, a broad interpretation of ‘employment’ should encompass domestic work within households and voluntary work (Collins, 2017, p. 31); insisting solely on market-paid activities as being work seems illogical. As Standing (2017, p. 157) highlights, a parent caring for his/her children is performing as much ‘work’ as someone being paid to care for another’s child. Furthermore, new work models arising from digital technology, where distinctions between paid and unpaid work activities are becoming blurred, are on the rise (contributing to the blurring of traditional boundaries between paid and non-paid work activities). The second condition is the right to just and favourable conditions of work, which encompasses the right to non-exploitative work, fair wages and suitable working conditions (such as reasonable working hours, appropriate leave, and a safe work environment).

Some scholars have cautioned against a tension which exists between these two aspects of the right to work (Collins, 2017, p. 24). More precisely, this tension lies between the government’s duty to ensure employment opportunities, often referred to as the ‘quantitative dimension’ of the right, and the obligation to ensure decent working conditions, which can be labelled as its ‘qualitative’ dimension. As already emphasized, when employment strategies are designed to compel individuals into work, the likely outcome involves a reduced unemployment rate accompanied by precarious, low-paid, and poor-quality jobs. This situation can lead to distortions in the labour market, as the influx of inexpensive labour prompted by employment programmes exerts downward pressure on wages and working conditions. Moreover, coercing people into accepting jobs they dislike and/or are not proficient in does not contribute to the development of a healthy economy or productive businesses.

To maintain favourable working conditions and promote the necessary re-skilling demanded by the digital transformation of work, the 'quantitative' dimension of the right should be detached from the unrealistic goal of full employment. Instead, the focus should shift towards strategies that enhance people's employability and efficiency in the labour market through active labour-market policies. Conditions should also be relaxed, in line with the proposed broad interpretation of the term 'free choice of employment'. People should have the freedom to wait for fulfilling job offers or to prioritize training or activities outside the marketplace over undesirable paid work. A rewarding job performed under decent conditions is the only type of work with the potential to bolster the freedom and self-esteem it is intended to provide; dignity should not only be linked to the traditional notion of work carried out for pay in the marketplace. Household work, community service, training and education, and even leisure can serve as sources of self-esteem and dignity. UBI can offer substantial support for the realization of such a right to work. As previously mentioned, regular payments can provide people with the necessary time to search for new employment, engage in education and training, or even participate in household work. UBI can also enhance the 'qualitative' dimension of the right to work: when individuals have the power to reject undesirable jobs, their bargaining position vis-à-vis employers becomes stronger. This is likely to result in higher wages and improved working conditions.

Here a second significant counterargument against UBI arises: recipients of unconditional cash payments might opt to remain inactive rather than participate in work or training. However, this notion is not substantiated by research; findings from pilots and even common sense suggest otherwise. For instance, as observed in a research paper by Jones and Marinescu (2022), Alaskans work at roughly the same rate as in comparable states; part-time employment even witnessed a 1.8% increase. The explanation is quite straightforward: welfare can only provide payments to meet individuals' most basic needs. If they desire more, as they typically do, or seek the self-fulfilment that work can offer, they must engage in employment. Even when individuals are not motivated by income augmentation, they are likely to participate in productive activities in a broader sense, such as education, childcare, and community engagement, which also benefit society and the economy.

Conclusions: Primarily a question of political backing

The introduction of a basic income presents itself as a potential solution to address the challenges brought about by AI and the automation of work; it could even be the sole solution if predictions regarding mass unemployment become true. It undoubtedly stands as a revolutionary and potentially utopian idea. Yet history has witnessed the realization of numerous revolutionary policies that once seemed

impossible. Consider, for instance, the first compulsory old-age social insurance programme implemented in Germany in 1889, devised by Chancellor Otto von Bismarck.

Arguments against UBI are often rooted in ideological and preconceived viewpoints. Affordability emerges as one of the strongest counterarguments, yet it is a hurdle that can be overcome, particularly if we contemplate a partial basic income coupled with some means-tested welfare benefits. In essence, affordability is primarily a political issue. Politicians have traditionally displayed limited interest in advocating for UBI policies, possibly because the positive outcomes are observable only in the long term, extending beyond the scope of the next election cycle. Hence the benefits need to be convincingly presented to the public. Taxpaying voters typically exhibit a greater propensity to accept welfare when conditions are attached. However, surveys and analyses indicate that UBI gained unprecedented traction in the aftermath of the pandemic: the substantial unconditional payments provided by governments to alleviate the economic shock showcased some of UBI's advantages. Surveys and analyses conducted during the pandemic revealed that many individuals who were not previously in precarious situations and whose income was jeopardized by pandemic-induced shocks shifted their preference towards the notion of a universal social safety net encompassing the entire population (Nettle et al., 2021). A YouGov poll conducted in late 2020 found that approximately two-thirds of respondents across six European countries were in favour of UBI (We Move Europe, n.d.). However, as the acute phase of the pandemic ended and economic activities went back to normal, support for UBI waned.

This decline is somewhat expected, as taxpaying voters are more inclined to endorse welfare with conditions and tend to favour existing social policy arrangements over untested new ones (Weisstanner, 2022). Consequently, the pandemic relief efforts themselves did not transition into sustained basic-income schemes. Nevertheless, the global experience of COVID-19 could potentially make the eventual adoption of UBI more plausible. This moment in history might be opportune for taking a decisive step in this direction, especially considering that while pandemics are rare, similarly disruptive impacts on employment could arise from the digital transformation of work.

However, it is crucial to recognize that a 'one size fits all' approach is unsuitable for UBI, given the vast diversity in economies and welfare programmes across countries. Future research, tailored to the specific characteristics of each state, is essential for refining the optimal design of UBI, encompassing factors such as benefit levels, financing mechanisms, and its interaction with other welfare benefits. Experiments may also be significant, but they should be meticulously constructed so as to address the questions and doubts surrounding UBI. As advocated by Standing (2017, pp. 276–282), a pilot programme should be devised to challenge the hypotheses and biases frequently raised against UBI. It should incorporate key elements to

circumvent the shortcomings encountered in previous pilot initiatives; for instance, it should be universally and sufficiently substantial, extended for an adequate duration without alteration once launched, and maintain a relatively consistent sample. Additionally, random control groups should be used.

Last but not least, a robust argument in favour of UBI merits serious consideration. Given the looming threat of automation, do we have superior alternatives? Driverless cars and delivery robots are undergoing extensive testing in California, and they are set to replace taxi drivers, Uber drivers, and similar roles. The grim reality is that widespread labour displacement is imminent. Thus swift action is imperative, and we need to act promptly before it is too late.

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