"Wages for Intern Work and Quarters for Keystrokes: An Exploration of Unpaid Intern Labour in Information Work Within the Context of 'Free' Digital Labour"

[SLIDE 1]

Karly Wildenhaus' "Wages for Intern Work: Denormalizing Unpaid Positions in Archives and Libraries" from a recent special issue of the *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* makes the compelling case for greater awareness – and, critically, greater *scrutiny* – of unpaid labour in contemporary information work, particularly as it manifests in unpaid internships in libraries and archives.

The piece deftly analyzes the subject of unpaid internships from several different vantages, the succession of which I will attempt to summarize here. **[SLIDE 2]** Wildenhaus initially glosses the Autonomist Marxist-Feminist Wages for Housework movement to provide "a genealogy of thought and rhetorical strategies" for the (piece's proposed) Wages for Intern Work movement. Though she acknowledges that "[t]he superimposition of the efforts of Wages for Housework onto a demand for wages for intern work is inherently complicated by the nuances particular to the differences between work performed inside versus outside the domestic sphere" (5), her effort to establish this lineage in some sense appears to come down to demonstrating that "[d]emanding remuneration for work that has been systematically deemed as having no economic value is not without precedent" (4). **[SLIDE 3]** She then explores the history and legality of unpaid internships, drawing from Ross Perlin's *Intern Nation*, and explains the primary beneficiary test as established by the U.S. Department of Labor's (innocuous sounding) "Fact Sheet #71." **[SLIDE 4]** Next, she situates unpaid internships more broadly within a neoliberal context by placing them on what she terms the "ladder of precarity," which also functions as an axis "where relative transience, security, and power is determined by the contractual structure of a given worker's position, and there is continual pressure on employers to move essential work within archives and libraries down the ladder through strategies such as deprofessionalization and limiting workers' hours in order to reduce the overhead of labour costs and employee benefits" (12). **[SLIDE 5]** Finally, she closes with "strategies for different actors within information work and MLIS graduate education to denormalize unpaid internships" (13). These include, for example, the imperative to "Develop an 'Intern Bill of Rights' for your organization(s)," which she targets specifically to employers and professional organizations and the admonishment that "MLIS programs can lead the charge, and stakeholders can push them to do so" wherein she stipulates, among other things, that "MLIS programs should shift language around internships so as to denormalize unpaid labour, provide support for pay negotiation and legal protection, act as outward facing advocates for paying interns to employers, and restrict or ban unpaid positions on institutional listservs and job boards" (17).

Of these proposed strategies, I was particularly struck by Wildenhaus' penultimate one, which she notably highlights as an "associated strategy" for *all* her chart's groups, whether understood as organizations or individuals: **[SLIDE 6]** "Find the connections with other issues affecting information workers" (19). Here, she states,

> There are a number of opportunities to connect unpaid internships to other critical issues that arise throughout information work under the influences of neoliberalism. While

> scholars and educators in LIS should be candid about the many forces that devalue the labour in archives and libraries, unpaid internships and their effects in reducing equity and access can also be approached from many angles including diversity, inclusion, equity, and social mobility for people of all genders, races, ability, and socioeconomic status. (19)

Wildenhaus is correct to suggest the urgent need to explore the issue of unpaid labour in information work from a more granular and intersectional perspective. In a wide-ranging recent integrative literature review, "Ubiquitous yet Ambiguous: An Integrative Review of Unpaid Work," Grant-Smith and McDonald find that "[a]ccess to unpaid work experience opportunities are identified in the literature as being highly classed, raced, gendered, ageist and subject to geographical inequalities" (566). They continue,

> those who are economically disadvantaged may not have the same opportunities to participate due to the imperative of juggling unpaid work and paid work … to cover living expenses. These limits to participation may function as a structure of exclusion and reduced social mobility within the labour market by constraining career opportunities and access to certain employment pathways for those without adequate financial, social and educational resources. (566)

This echoes Perlin who asserts that "[i]nternships quietly embody and promote inequalities of opportunity that we have been striving diligently to reduce in courts, schools, and communities" (xv). Certainly it is incumbent on anyone attempting to work through (what MIT Director of Libraries Chris Bourg has termed) "the unbearable whiteness of librarianship" (Bourg), or (following Roma Harris) librarianship as a distinctly feminized vocation to include the unpaid LIS internship as "structure of exclusion" somewhere in their thinking's calculus.

I should stipulate that I have chosen not to treat the problematic that I attempt to tackle in the remainder of this presentation, however, particularly granularly or intersectionally and that is, in a way, *deliberate* because my aim is to try to establish a broad, perhaps (in the end) only provisional connection between unpaid internship labour in information work, as analyzed by Wildenhaus, and unpaid digital labour of the kind that (nearly) all of us routinely perform online, particularly on major commercial social media platforms. I do still see this work though as responding to her call "to connect unpaid internships to other critical issues that arise throughout information work under the influences of neoliberalism." I should even acknowledge that Wildenhaus does gesture in my argument's direction early in her article when discussing Wages for Housework's legacy for contemporary activist movements. As she states,

> [o]ther contemporary advocacy groups have done the same [established a lineage with Wages for Housework], most notably in the context of the visual arts, where the group Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.), curator Laurel Ptak's Wages for Facebook manifesto, and Leigh Claire La Berge's essay 'Wages Against Artwork: The Social Practice of Decommodification' all cite the legacy of Wages for Housework in addressing how some forms of labour are valued over others. (5-6)

Laurel Ptak, curator and currently a faculty member in the graduate program of Curatorial Practice at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, anonymously posted the **[SLIDE 7]** Wages for Facebook manifesto – to wagesforfacebook.com where it remains up – in January 2014, where it went on to stimulate a broad public conversation about workers' rights, the nature of labour, and the politics of its refusal in the digital age. The manifesto's text – which I had to copy from the site's source code due to the user intentionally having no control over the page's scroll mechanism – begins rousingly as follows:

> They say it's friendship. We say it's unwaged work.
> With every like, chat, tag or poke our subjectivity turns them a profit.
> They call it sharing. We call it stealing.
> We've been bound by their terms of service far too long—it's time for our terms. (Ptak)

Of what follows, the section that most directly invokes the arguments of the Wages for Housework movement arrives slightly over half way through:

> To ask for wages for Facebook will by itself undermine the expectations society has of us, since these expectations—the essence of our socialization—are all functional to our wageless condition online. In this sense, it is more apt to compare the struggle of women for wages than the struggle of male workers in the factory for more wages. When we struggle for wages we struggle unambiguously and directly against our social exploitation. (Ptak)

In addition to the intended resonances with Sylvia Federici and Wages for Housework, the ideas that inform a project like Wages for Facebook bear a resemblance to those of contemporary Marxists like Nick Dyer-Witheford, Urusula Huws, and Christian Fuchs, who, in recent books such as *Cyber-Proletariat*, *Labor in the Global Digital Economy*, and *Digital Labour and Karl Marx* have reinvigorated Marxist thinking for the contemporary moment of digital labour and rapacious platform capitalism. I was not surprised to read, for example, that, when an installation of Wages for Facebook was mounted as part of the 2014 exhibition *And How Are We Feeling Today?* at the University Art Gallery at the University of California, San Diego, a copy of Fuchs' book was included in the exhibition along with Jaron Lanier's *Who Owns the Future?* (Jung 47).

Fuchs, in "Dallas Smythe Today - The Audience Commodity, the Digital Labour Debate, Marxist Political Economy and Critical Theory. Prolegomena to a Digital Labour Theory of Value," provides a rigorous reading of users' unpaid digital labour on social media platforms (specifically Facebook), linking such labour to Dallas Smythe's idea of the "audience commodity." Smythe, a twentieth century political economy of communications theorist, saw in television and radio advertising models a relation of audience to "platform" that arguably anticipated digital labour on contemporary social media. According to Fuchs, Smythe's pivotal insight was to articulate that the *audience* itself (understood as readership, listenership, or viewership) was sold as the central commodity form to advertisers in the age of mass-produced, advertiser-supported communications under monopoly capitalism. As Smythe claimed, in "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism," **[SLIDE 8]**

> [t]he material reality under monopoly capitalism is that all non-sleeping time of most of the population is work time. This work time is devoted to the production of commodities-in-general (both where people get paid for their work and as members of audiences) and in the production and reproduction of labour power (the pay for which is subsumed in their income). Of the off-the-job work time, the largest single block is time of the audiences which is sold to advertisers. It is not sold by workers but by the mass media of communications. Who produces this commodity? The mass media of communications do by the mix of explicit and hidden advertising and 'programme' material. (3)

Fuchs adapts this insight to the contemporary social media platform context, coining the notion of the "Internet prosumer commodity" (706) – a composite of "user-generated content, transaction data, virtual advertising space and time" (713) – that is sold to online advertising clients. Social media platform users that live out their social and affective lives on platforms in ways described by Ptak's Wages for Facebook manifesto – "friending," reacting, commenting, subscribing, etc – are never paid for this data trace-generating labour and quickly become, according to Fuchs, "infinitely exploited by capital" (714): **[SLIDE 9]**

> The rate of exploitation (also called the rate of surplus value) measures the relationship of workers' unpaid work time and paid work time. The higher the rate of exploitation, the more work time is unpaid. Users of commercial social media platforms have no wages … Therefore, the rate of surplus value converges towards infinity. Internet prosumer labour is infinitely exploited by capital … *Infinite exploitation means that all or nearly all online activity and time becomes part of commodities and no share of this time is paid*. (714, emphasis added)

What emerges from working to understand the argument that runs through Smythe, Fuchs, and Ptak is that all of us, whether or not we self-identify as skilled "information workers" or "information professionals," are doing *another* kind of (unpaid) "information work" online compulsively everyday when we do something as banal as share our opinion on a recent news article on Twitter, solicit dinner recommendations in a new city on Facebook, or console a cousin who is publically mourning a lost pet on Instagram.

I believe that Wildenhaus is ultimately right to focus her energies on the immediate, practical goal of denormalizing unpaid positions in archives and libraries, and, as mentioned above, her closing "Strategies" section is filled with many important calls to action, that – if taken up meaningfully within the information work professions and academia – could lead to significant, material improvements for *all* labourers implicated in her "ladder of precarity." To my mind, however, a powerful (heretofore unseized) opportunity for solidarity exists when we place unpaid intern labour in relation to unpaid digital labour, when we recognize the commonalities between both instantiations of (unpaid) "information work," however initially dissimilar they may seem.

Both unpaid intern labour and unpaid digital labour exist within an economic and cultural context created by decades of late capitalist neoliberal austerity measures. As (non-waged) economic relations that have emerged within this context they are far more alike than one may initially recognize. As Fuchs articulates, "[neoliberalism] is a form of politics that aims at

helping capital to reduce the price of labour power as much as possible, if possible even below the minimum value that is needed for human existence" (727). It follows, for him, that platform capitalism's infinite exploitation of Internet prosumer labour for no wage is proof of concept for capital's relentless desire to reduce the cost of labour power to absolute zero, and this is why Fuchs' quantitative analysis of Facebook in "Dallas Smythe Today" – that there were 35,486,111 full-time (unpaid) equivalents of work generating value for Facebook in 2011 (715) – remains so striking. One way to frame unpaid intern labour then is to conceive of it as the antecedent "meatspace" version of this phenomenon, though, *crucially*, it is discursively bolstered by a pervasive neoliberal human capital regime as theorized by mid-twentieth century writers like Theodore Schultz and Gary Becker. Indeed, as Sophie Hope and Joanna Figiel articulate in "Interning and Investing: Rethinking Unpaid Work, Social Capital, and the 'Human Capital Regime,'" "the intern as neoliberal subject is investing in his or her own stock value. The [advertisement for a] placement at the ICA [the Institute for Contemporary Arts in London, which the authors analyze as a discursive artifact of contemporary intern culture] reflects a system that relies on students undervaluing their stock value so that they willingly and competitively take up the 'opportunity' of an unpaid placement to increase their value in the future" (369). Human capital ideology's insidious – and almost fully naturalized – subjectification of early career labourers, such that they unthinkingly feel the need to "speculate" on their own value's futures market, works to obfuscate the reality of and to *justify* millions of full-time (unpaid) equivalents of work generating value for a vast swathe of institutions every year, including libraries and archives.

Tiziana Terranova, writing in her seminal book *Network Culture* about "free labor" in reference to the open source movement provides a provocative perspective, however, that differs slightly from Fuchs, and that I would like to introduce as a kind of parting gesture here. As she claims, "[r]ather than representing a moment of incorporation of a previously authentic moment, the open-source question demonstrates the overreliance of the digital economy as such on free labour, free both in the sense of 'not financially rewarded' and of 'willingly given'" (93-4). She continues: **[SLIDE 10]**

> Such a reliance, almost a dependency, is part of larger mechanisms of capitalist extraction of value which are fundamental to late capitalism as a whole. That is, such processes are not created outside capital and then reappropriated by capital, but are the results of a complex history where the relation between labour and capital is mutually constitutive, entangled and crucially forged during the crisis of Fordism. *Free labour is a desire of labour immanent to late capitalism*, and late capitalism is the field which both sustains free labour *and* exhausts it. It exhausts it by undermining the means through which that labour can sustain itself: from the burnout syndromes of Internet start-ups to under-compensation and exploitation in the cultural economy at large. Late capitalism does not appropriate anything: it nurtures, exploits and exhausts its labour force and its cultural and affective production (94, emphasis added)

Though, as aforementioned, this Terranova excerpt surfaces in her discussion of open source "free labour," I am impressed by how her words could easily apply to the lived realities of both unpaid digital labour and unpaid intern labour; twinned manifestations of "free labour [as] a desire of labour immanent to late capitalism" (94). I am also struck by how these descriptors –

nurtured (we might say by human capital regimes), exploited, exhausted – could serve as an accurate summation of my generation of labourers.

In conclusion, as I have attempted to demonstrate, Wildenhaus' argument, though compelling and urgent, can be productively brought into dialogue with theorizations of unpaid digital labour culture-wide and extended, such that we can link our desire for the elimination of unpaid intern labour in libraries and archives to a broader desire to be compensated for platform capitalism's rapacious commodification of our cognitive and affective lives. In demanding compensation, particularly for the latter, I follow Federici who remarks (of Wages for Housework) that "[the Wages for Housework activists] believed that a successful campaign draining the source of … unpaid labor would break the process of capital accumulation, and confront capital and the state on a terrain common to most women" (8-9). Here, though, as we now represent a broader constituency we can attempt to "confront capital and the state" on a terrain common to all who labour and use corporate social media platforms.

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