

Wages for Intern Work and Quarters for Keystrokes:

An Exploration of Unpaid Intern Labour in Information Work Within the Context of 'Free' Digital Labour

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Perspective

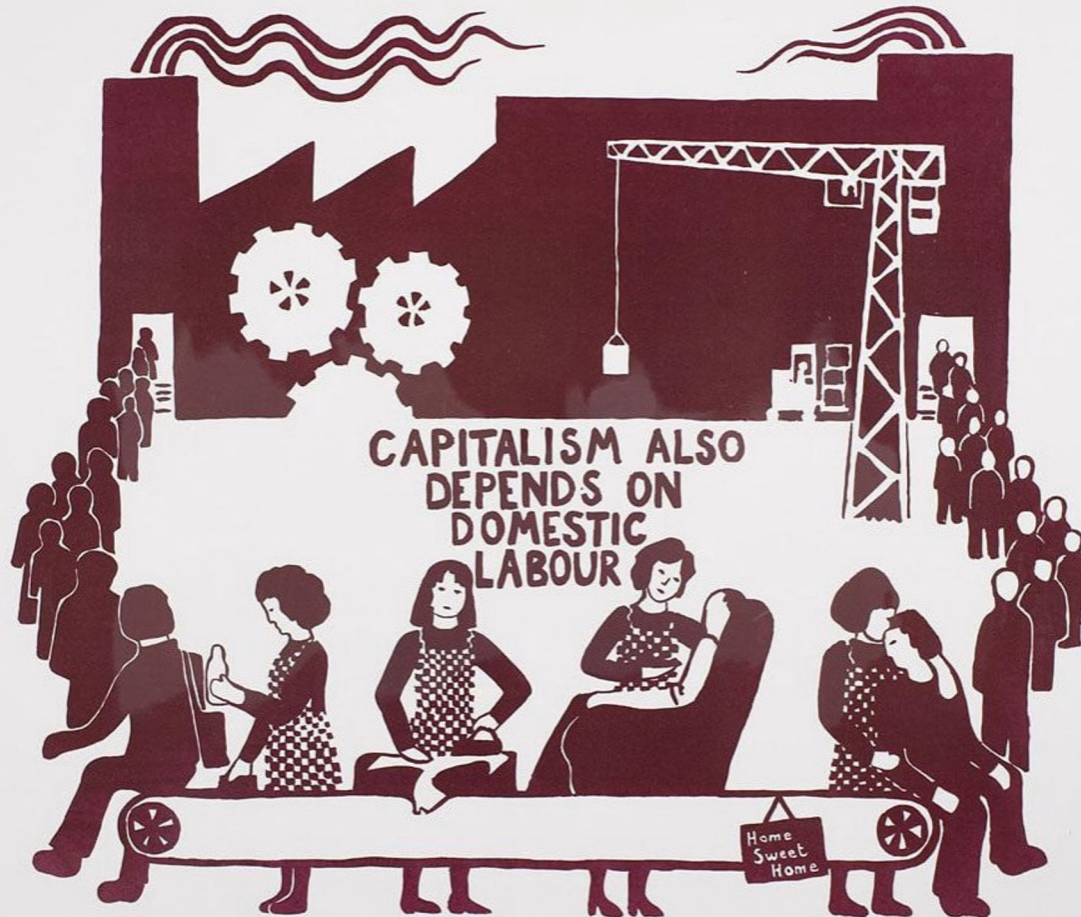
Wages for Intern Work: Denormalizing Unpaid Positions in Archive and Libraries

Karly Wildenhaus

ABSTRACT

While no comprehensive studies have yet been published quantifying the extent of unpaid internships within archives and libraries, their prevalence is easily recognized as widespread. Unpaid internships are offered and facilitated based on the implication that they correlate positively to future job prospects, although recent studies point to evidence that complicates this idea. Instead, the prevalence of unpaid internships may negatively impact efforts for diversity and inclusion among information workers while contributing to greater precarity of labor throughout the workforce. Meanwhile, professional organizations and academic programs often do not discuss the realities of unpaid internships, and some MLIS programs require or encourage students to work without remuneration for course credit at their own expense. Situating unpaid internships within larger questions of economic access, labor laws, indebtedness, and neoliberalization, this paper advocates for the denormalization of unpaid internships within archives and libraries, especially for those institutions that articulate social justice as part of their institutional values. Although rendering these positions obsolete is likely beyond the power of any one entity, this paper identifies strategies that can be taken at the individual- and institutional-level to advance economic justice and the dignity of all work that occurs in our respective fields.

Wages for Housework



See Red Women's Workshop. "Capitalism Also Depends on Domestic Labour." *Feminist Posters 1974-1990*, seeredwomensworkshop.wordpress.com. Accessed 12 August 2019.

Fact Sheet #71: Internship Programs Under The Fair Labor Standards Act

Courts have used the “**primary beneficiary test**” to determine whether an intern or student is, in fact, an employee under the FLSA. In short, this test allows courts to examine the “economic reality” of the intern-employer relationship to determine which party is the “primary beneficiary” of the relationship. Courts have identified the following **seven factors** as part of the test:

1. The extent to which the intern and the employer clearly understand that there is no expectation of compensation. Any promise of compensation, express or implied, suggests that the intern is an employee—and vice versa.

2. The extent to which the internship provides training that would be similar to that which would be given in an educational environment, including the clinical and other hands-on training provided by educational institutions.

3. The extent to which the internship is tied to the intern’s formal education program by integrated coursework or the receipt of academic credit.

4. The extent to which the internship accommodates the intern’s academic commitments by corresponding to the academic calendar.

5. The extent to which the internship’s duration is limited to the period in which the internship provides the intern with beneficial learning.

6. The extent to which the intern’s work complements, rather than displaces, the work of paid employees while providing significant educational benefits to the intern.

7. The extent to which the intern and the employer understand that the internship is conducted without entitlement to a paid job at the conclusion of the internship.

Wildenhaus'

“ladder of precarity” (12):

(↑ *most secure*)

tenured or continuous appointment positions;

non-tenured but permanent/indefinite positions;

long-term (>1 year) or renewable contract positions;

short-term (<1 year) or nonrenewable contract positions;³⁵

part-time/at will positions;

paid internships, paraprofessionals, apprenticeships;

unpaid internships;

work compensated on a per-task basis (such as through Mechanical Turk, crowdsourcing);

labor performed by incarcerated individuals

(↓ *most precarious*)

Wildenhaus' strategies (15-20):

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Seek more data.

For employers—pay your interns.

Develop an “Intern Bill of Rights” for your organization(s).

Create alternative funding models or infrastructures when necessary.

MLIS programs can lead the charge, and stakeholders can push them to do so.

Professional organizations should pursue this issue within their advocacy for the profession.

Create and maintain lists of paid internships.

Join others in work towards policy change at the government level.

Seek allies by joining organizations and partnering with individuals already undertaking labor advocacy in information work.

Find the connections with other issues affecting information work.

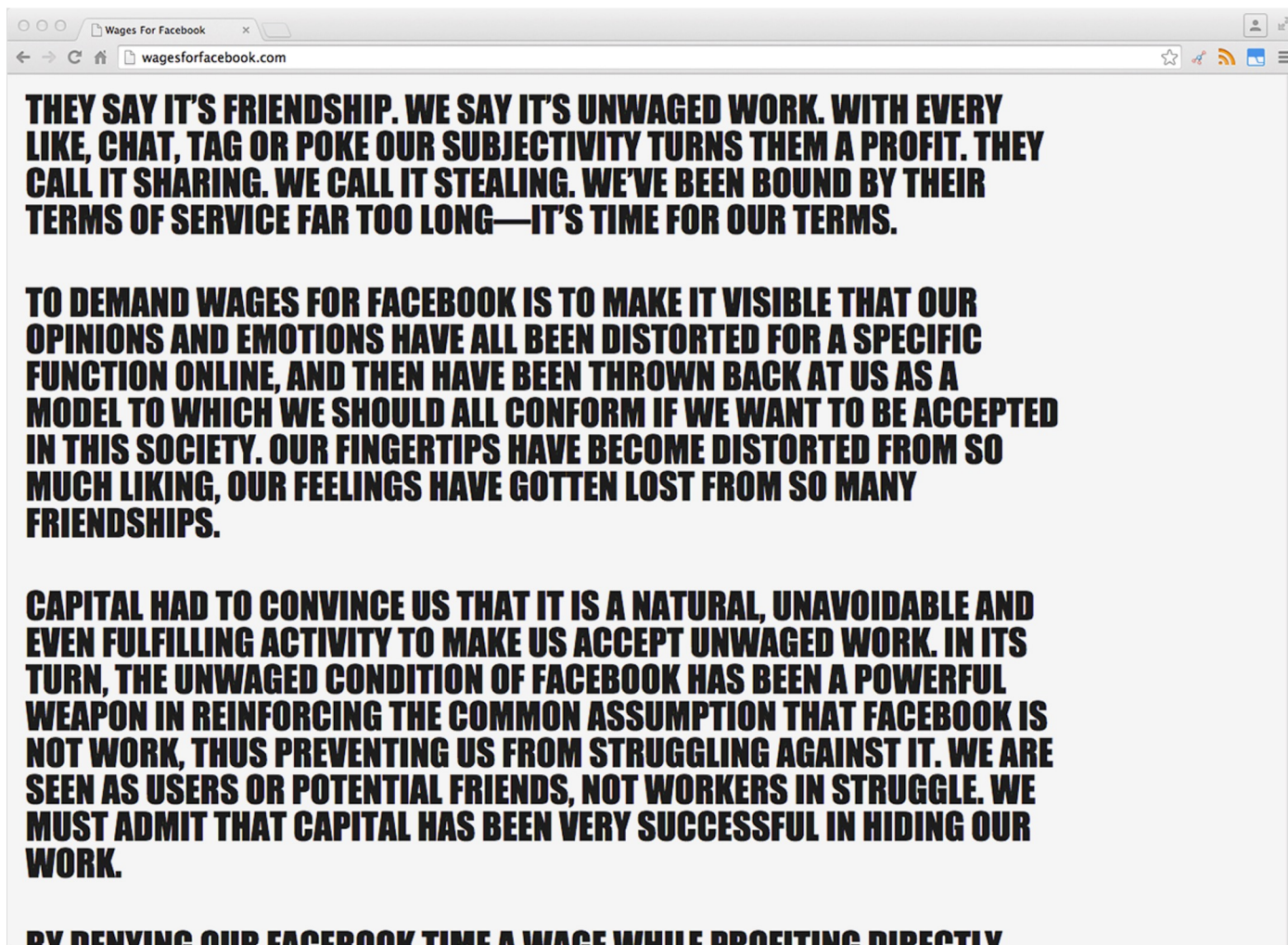
For interns—refuse to work for free.

“Find the connections with other issues affecting information workers”:

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, emphasis added)

Laurel Ptak's Wages for Facebook (2014)

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A screenshot of a web browser window displaying the 'Wages for Facebook' manifesto. The browser's address bar shows 'wagesforfacebook.com'. The page content consists of three paragraphs of bold, black, uppercase text. The first paragraph reads: '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.' The second paragraph reads: 'TO DEMAND WAGES FOR FACEBOOK IS TO MAKE IT VISIBLE THAT OUR OPINIONS AND EMOTIONS HAVE ALL BEEN DISTORTED FOR A SPECIFIC FUNCTION ONLINE, AND THEN HAVE BEEN THROWN BACK AT US AS A MODEL TO WHICH WE SHOULD ALL CONFORM IF WE WANT TO BE ACCEPTED IN THIS SOCIETY. OUR FINGERTIPS HAVE BECOME DISTORTED FROM SO MUCH LIKING, OUR FEELINGS HAVE GOTTEN LOST FROM SO MANY FRIENDSHIPS.' The third paragraph reads: 'CAPITAL HAD TO CONVINC US THAT IT IS A NATURAL, UNAVOIDABLE AND EVEN FULFILLING ACTIVITY TO MAKE US ACCEPT UNWAGED WORK. IN ITS TURN, THE UNWAGED CONDITION OF FACEBOOK HAS BEEN A POWERFUL WEAPON IN REINFORCING THE COMMON ASSUMPTION THAT FACEBOOK IS NOT WORK, THUS PREVENTING US FROM STRUGGLING AGAINST IT. WE ARE SEEN AS USERS OR POTENTIAL FRIENDS, NOT WORKERS IN STRUGGLE. WE MUST ADMIT THAT CAPITAL HAS BEEN VERY SUCCESSFUL IN HIDING OUR WORK.' The fourth line of text is partially visible at the bottom of the page: 'BY DENYING OUR FACEBOOK TIME A WAGE WHILE PROFITING DIRECTLY'.

Ptak, Laurel. "Wages for Facebook Manifesto." *Wages for Facebook*, www.wagesforfacebook.com. Accessed 20 July 2019.

Dallas W. Smythe's “audience commodity”:

[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)

Christian Fuchs on the “Internet prosumer commodity”:

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)

Tiziana Terranova on “free labour”:

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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)

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