

# Interrogating Internships: Unpaid Work, Creative Industries, and Higher Education

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# Interrogating Internships: Unpaid Work, Creative Industries, and Higher Education

## Introduction

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Unpaid work has never looked so good. Internships, especially those in creative industries, enjoy a glamorous aura: celebrities like Kanye West and Lady Gaga intern at fashion labels, movies like *The Internship* make working for nothing look like fun, universities design sleek online promotional materials for their internship programs, and Malia Obama, the daughter of the President of the United States, lands a prized internship on the set of the HBO series *Girls*, cementing the number one rule of the intern game: who you know matters. In barely five years, internships have gone from being largely hidden to becoming a highly visible feature of the contemporary labour economy. They are also hotly debated. Controversy surrounding the legality of internships was brewing when magazine publishing giant Condé Nast cancelled its internship program in 2013. The response to the publisher's decision captures the opposing perspectives in the internship debate: many cheered the end of a scheme that asked debt-laden young people to labour for free for a profitable corporation, while others lamented the closure of what appears to be one of the only routes into hyper-competitive media work.

Opinions on internships may be split, but the gloss on this quasi-employment arrangement is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. Today, internships are a site of contestation. They are a target of student activism, a topic of policy deliberation among politicians, and a subject of media coverage. Two intern stories grabbed headlines as we completed this special issue. One was the announcement that some 40 interns filed a class-action lawsuit against Dualstar Entertainment Group, the US company owned by celebrity twins Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen. The suit alleges wage-theft, with reports that interns clocked 50-hour workweeks without receiving monetary payment or academic credit in exchange for their time and effort (McGrath 2015). The second story was of a young New Zealander, David Hyde, who took an unpaid internship with the United Nations (UN) at the cost of living in a tent in Geneva, a prohibitively expensive city teeming with interns. Hyde revealed that he had all along intended to leak the truth about his accommodations. The savvy intern leveraged the media interest as a chance to speak out: "I strongly believed that unpaid internships are unjust because they further perpetuate inequality" (cited in Brooks-Pollock 2015). As Hyde used the soapbox to call on interns globally to unite, the UN faced pressure to review its internship system. Internships, and the questions of social and economic justice that are intrinsic to them, are not confined to the ostensibly prestigious working worlds of media and politics. Taiwan-based electronics manufacturer Foxconn was caught staffing its assembly lines in China with student interns, and Tesco Ireland has used the government welfare program JobBridge to advertise internships in shelf-stacking at its supermarkets.

Internships have particular resonance for researchers and teachers in media, communication, and cultural studies. For starters, many departments in these fields operate internship programs. Internship schemes are hardly unique to media, culture, and communication programs, but what is unique is that the curricula of these departments are often devoted to scrutinizing the institutional structures, social implications, and symbolic products of the very industries that are routinely singled out as playing a key role in recruiting and normalizing unpaid or low-paid intern labour. “The real abusers of the intern economy”, as Jim Frederick (1997) put it in one of the first major critiques of internships, “are the glamour industries.” Boosting the supply of intern labour for these industries is the allure of occupations that promise opportunity for self-expression, which in turn dovetails with the injunction to “do what you love” (see Tokumitsu 2015). Internships also are pertinent to communication studies because internships are an emerging trope in popular media culture, from the depiction of interns on reality TV programs to the launch of the stylish magazine *Intern*, whose editorial mission is to showcase and celebrate interns’ creative talents. Research on media representations of interns, institutional discourses on internships, and the material conditions of interns in the arts, media, and cultural industries can both draw upon and add to the growing literature on labour in media, cultural, and communication studies (see for example Ross 2000, 2009; McRobbie 2002, 2015; Deuze 2005; Gill and Pratt 2008; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010; Banks, Gill and Taylor 2013; Fuchs 2014; Huws 2014; Gregg 2012).

Until recently, internships have tended to escape critical attention. There are, however, significant exceptions, including Frederick’s (1997) classic essay, “The Internment Camp”, published in *The Baffler*, Naomi Klein’s (2000) inclusion of intern issues in her counter-globalization epic, *No Logo*, and Gina Neff and Giovanni Arata’s (2007) trailblazing study of academic internships in communication industries. The widening of public discussion of internships was prompted by the confluence of the 2008 financial crisis, rising levels of youth unemployment, and Occupy Wall Street. These factors readied the warm reception of Ross Perlin’s exposé, *Intern Nation: How to Earn Nothing and Learn Little in the Brave New Economy* (2011), a book that was vital in pushing internships into a critical spotlight internationally. Thanks to Perlin’s research, labour journalists attuned to the intern issue, and, most importantly, pushback by interns themselves, the perception of the internship as a benign stepping-stone on a young person’s path to gainful employment has been shattered. Nor are internships any longer a neglected subject in media, communication, and cultural studies. Indeed, this special issue of *tripleC* joins a steadily expanding body of activist and critical scholarly accounts of internships (e.g., Carrotworkers’ Collective 2011; Figiel 2012; Hope and Figiel 2012; Daniel and Daniel 2013; Frenette 2013; Seibert and Wilson 2013; Hesmondhalgh and Percival 2014; Ashton and Noonan 2013; Chillias, Marks and Galloway 2015; Shade and Jacobson 2015; Leonard, Halford and Bruce, forthcoming).

Critiques of the intern economy are trenchant and plentiful. A grievance list would include the arguments that glamourizing unpaid internships naturalizes the performance of unpaid labour and diminishes workers’ expectations of employers; that young workers graduating with student debt and facing grim job prospects amid high unemployment (see Geobey 2013) often have little choice but to undertake unpaid internships; that unpaid interns displace paid employees; that higher education institutions, whose formal involvement in an internship is frequently required to comply with the law, economically benefit when tuition is charged to a student working unpaid to earn course credit; that interns’ vague employment status often excludes them from certain entitlements and health and safety protections; that there is inadequate oversight of internships on the part of government regulators; that unpaid internships have a poor record of leading to paid jobs, with one survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2014) in the US revealing that only 38.5 percent of unpaid interns in for-profit businesses were offered paid employment; and that companies, particularly those in culturally attractive industries, capitalize on young workers’ passions by using un- or low-paid interns rather than hire entry-level employees, who require training, mentorship, and commitment.

Crosscutting those mentioned above are critiques that focus sharply on systemic inequalities that are reflected, silenced, and reinforced in and through the internship system in a

variety of ways. Refusing discourses of meritocracy to explain employment opportunity (or lack thereof), critics of unpaid internships consistently point out the class barrier: those unable to afford to work for free are shut out. When an intern takes out a loan or holds down a part-time job to subsidize an unpaid placement, internships interlock with debt and the wider precarious employment regime. Class-based social networks, such as family-linked contacts, are also an informal gateway to internships in competitive professional fields (Richards 2011). Class is neither the sole basis nor an isolated axis of inequality in the intern economy, of course. Although not all interns are young, the prevailing ageist assumption holds that it is more acceptable for a young person to work without a wage. Preliminary research indicates that more women than men do unpaid internships, continuing and deepening gendered divisions in the labour market (see Attfield and Couture 2014). Institutional racism keeps people of colour out (see Boulton, this issue). And new immigrants face pressure to accept unpaid work as a way to get nationally recognized experience. In these and other ways, we begin to see the internship system as a set of social mechanisms that differentially include and exclude populations along intersecting lines of age, class, gender, race, and status. As Alexandre Frenette et al. (2015) found in a survey of 10,698 arts-school graduates in the US, “women, Black, Hispanic/Latino, and first-generation college graduate arts alumni all appear to have held a disproportionate number of unpaid internships—which... are tied to significantly weaker career payoffs than paid internships” (8-9). That existing social divisions structure entry into work in the communication, media, and cultural industries is not only a problem of access, however. It is simultaneously a problem of representation. As Klein (2000, 246) wrote of media internships fifteen years ago, “This racket is not only exploitative in the classic sense, it also has some very real implications for the future of cultural production: today’s interns are tomorrow’s managers, producers and editors... .”

The cumulative effect of serial internships and zero-wages is the hardening of established social exclusions in the labour market, the devaluation of labour, wage depression across the labour economy, and the acclimatization of a generation of indebted workers to hustling from gig to gig with few expectations of their employers. Internships are, then, an entry point for interrogating contested conditions of life, labour, and learning at a historical moment when precarity is an encroaching structure of feeling. It should be acknowledged, however, that our key term, internships, is an expansive category, referring to a vast and varied range of experiences: a weeks-long, unpaid, informally-obtained position with a multinational corporation; a semester-length paid placement in the context of a structured cooperative education program; a short-term stint at a small non-profit organization that provides a stipend to cover travel and food expenses; or countless other iterations. The sheer heterogeneity of work arrangements that can be labelled an “internship” is one reason why it is not overly useful to organize the debate about internships around contending poles of being “for” or “against” the practice. By framing this special issue as devoted to *interrogating* internships, we instead seek to advance analyses of the power relations that underpin the intern economy, and to examine internship phenomena from perspectives alert to contextual specificities. While all of the contributions to this issue are broadly concerned with investigating some of the multiple articulations between and among internships, capitalism, communication, culture, and subjectivity, the articles are structured around four thematic areas: conceptualizing internships; internships and creative industries; internships and higher education; and intern labour activism.

The articles in the first section, Conceptualizing Internships, contextualize and theorize internships from a variety of critical perspectives. Thomas F. Corrigan sets a stage for the issue by surveying existing literature on intern experiences in media and cultural industries and recasting this literature’s findings through conceptual lenses drawn from digital labour studies, such as self-exploitation, self-branding, and hope labour. Exploring the history of work-based learning and legal dimensions of internships in the US context, Alexandre Frenette draws parallels between the earlier apprenticeship system and the present-day intern economy, particularly with respect to minimum wage standards, government intervention, and understandings of the school-to-labour market transition. Contemporary internships are deeply shaped by neoliberal political and cultural regimes, under which periods of unwaged

work are viewed as future investments that sharpen young workers' competitiveness, enhance their "employability", and produce responsible, entrepreneurial subjects who are ready to work—themes that are central to Sophie Hope and Joanna Figiel's analysis of the "human capital regime" in the UK and how the arts and creative industries in particular are implicated in this regime. The pressure on interns to demonstrate passion and commitment to their work can lead to troublesome working situations, sexual harassment, excessive hours, and, in extreme cases, death (Tomlinson 2013). Bogdan Costea, Peter Watt, and Kostas Amiridis conclude this section with an essay taking as its point of departure the tragic death of Moritz Erhardt, an intern with the Bank of America Merrill Lynch. Interrogating the figure of the graduate, their article engages the emergence of such themes as self-realization and potentiality, and argues that the latter themes can become "dangerous once they are constituted as ideal measures of an unattainable level of performativity...", an argument that opens the possibility of thinking about internships as a training ground for hyper-commitment to work.

The second section of the issue, *Internships and Creative Industries*, examines internship programs, discourses, and experiences in different sectors and national contexts. Based on fieldwork at advertising agencies in New York City, Christopher Boulton shows that despite the existence of affirmative-action placement programs, racial discrimination persists as social connections linking intern candidates to agency executives and big clients are decisive in determining access to limited internship spots, a dynamic both reflecting and reproducing systemic white privilege in advertising agency settings. Tanner Mirrlees reports on a study of job postings for internships with production companies in the US reality TV industry, finding that employers expect candidates for unpaid internships to be highly skilled and thus prepared to perform actual work—a reality that undermines the intern category altogether. Writing from Italy, Roberto Ciccarelli offers a commentary on the contested deployment of a massive unpaid workforce for the 2015 World's Fair, Expo Milano, a stark instance of the institutionalization of unpaid work that proceeded with the support of major Italian trade unions. Addressing journalism internships in Canada, the next two articles look at how companies and unions struggle to define what is fair, how much (if anything) interns should be paid, and how interns fit into the broader labour economy of journalism. Based on survey and interview research, journalist Marlene Murphy provides a historical account of the development of internships at Canada's national broadcaster, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), and the relations between and among CBC staff, education institutions, the CBC union, and interns themselves. Errol Salamon documents the pay rates and collective representation for interns at newspapers and magazines in Canada, revealing that organized labour can play contradictory roles, either helping to resist un- or low-paid work, or enshrining un- or underpaid work into collective agreements. Concluding this section is David Lee's article, which shows that in the UK context, the "opportunity" to work for free spills beyond the glitz of creative industries into other sectors, where young people can intern in fast food and retail outlets, for example. Internships and the discourse surrounding them, Lee contends, can be seen as overlapping with neoliberal social welfare reform in general and the turn to "workfare" in particular.

Higher education plays a complicated role in the intern economy. In many jurisdictions, university and college programs provide the only technically legal internship placements, which offer students work experience they want—and in many cases need—to be employable upon graduation. But academic internship programs are often unregulated and poorly managed. Not only do they prime aspiring media and cultural workers for doing whatever it takes to land work, but internship-for-credit programs help sustain employers' offloading of labour costs onto the public and capitalize on students' willingness to pay to work. The third section, *Internships and Higher Education*, opens with Mara Einstein's analysis of how American universities and colleges use internships as part of their marketing strategies, which push internship programs in a bid to gain a competitive edge in recruitment. Informed by focus groups with student-interns in the gendered field of Public Relations, Michelle Rodino-Colocino and Stephanie Berberick explore how interns occupy a blurred space between being a student and being a worker and identify how internships teach students to "unthink

exploitation.” Ip lam Chong reports on an interview-based study of an internship program offered by his Cultural Studies department at Lingnan University in Hong Kong, exploring the sometimes surprising ways that students select, negotiate, and reflect upon their placements. Drawing on her experience at Western University, Sandra Smeltzer presents a critical model of service learning that is rooted in engagement with community and activist groups. Smeltzer shows that while developing internship placements with public-interest groups is important for community building and students’ understanding of themselves as citizens, such relationships are bound up in power dynamics that must be carefully reflected upon and continually negotiated. Shifting focus, Doug Tewksbury urges proponents of critical media literacy to do much more to encourage students to think about work and working conditions in media and cultural industries, including internships. While academic internships tend to be associated with students, Kirsten Forkert and Ana Lopes investigate the under-examined phenomenon of unpaid academic posts in the UK university sector. Forkert and Lopes detail how, in a context of growing public condemnation of unpaid internships, academic activists worked to block these posts.

Internships are in the media spotlight thanks to the spread and impact of advocacy efforts of interns themselves and their allies: interns have turned their communicative capacities to alternative ends, raising awareness about intern exploitation and workplace rights through direct action, creative online protest, and naming-and-shaming intern employers via social media (Cohen and de Peuter 2014). The fourth and final section of the issue, Intern Labour Activism, takes stock of interns’ resistance—their strategies, accomplishments, challenges, and potential future directions. Panos Kompatsiaris examines conflicts around internships in art institutions, primarily in the UK, reading this collective political action and the labour discourse surrounding it as in tension with prevailing tendencies marking the identity of the artist in contemporary capitalism. Intern Labor Rights, an activist group that emerged within the Occupy Wall Street movement in New York, reports on recent intern advocacy in the US, reviewing a range of interventions, from legal cases to student organizing, and emphasizing the importance of solidarity between interns and other workers in precarious employment. Next, a pair of articles addresses the politicization of internships in the Canadian province of Ontario, where intern advocacy has involved student activists, progressive lawyers, elected officials, and government regulators. William Webb describes and assesses elements of the intern activism in Ontario, which he thematizes as awareness-raising, legal challenges, and regulatory responses. And Nicole Cohen and Greig de Peuter interview some of the protagonists of intern activism in Ontario, a group of young lawyers and law students with astute perspectives on the possibilities and challenges for transforming the intern economy in the name of greater social and economic justice. This section concludes with a personal story from Vera Weghman about her involvement in a campaign to end the use of unpaid internships at an anti-poverty charitable organization in the UK, highlighting the contradictions lurking within the use of interns in the social sector.

The contributions to this special issue demonstrate that internships are a deeply fraught institution with a growing presence both within and beyond the vaunted creative industries. The accounts in this issue also indicate the extent to which employability is increasingly the primary ideal to which managers of higher education institutions and many students adhere, both parties keenly aware of the competitive environments in which they sell what they have to sell. Articles in this issue nonetheless provide evidence of alternative possibilities for interns and internships. This issue leaves us with many questions that might guide future engaged research: If internships provide many young people with their first encounter with the labour market, then what do internships—and, just as significantly, the process of obtaining an internship—teach students about the values of the dominant social order? If age, class, gender, race, and status are among the intersecting axes of exploitation in the internship system, then how might intern labour activism, and the broader labour movement, respond? If internships are predominately a mechanism that perpetuates inequality in the labour market, then how might internships be governed so that they are a mechanism for combatting inequality? If universities and colleges are one of the few places where interns are aggregated and internships are formalized, then how might academic workers and student unions



make their places of work and learning a site for mobilizing interns, advancing intern rights, and designing internships differently?

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Greig, Nicole, and Enda collaborate on the project Cultural Workers Organize ([culturalworkersorganize.org](http://culturalworkersorganize.org)), which examines cultural and media workers' collective responses to precarity.