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Interns Talk Back: Disrupting Media Narratives about Unpaid Work

Nicole S. Cohen, University of Toronto Mississauga

Greig de Peuter, Wilfrid Laurier University

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Abstract

In the 2010s, the intern rights movement challenged the view that the unpaid internship is an innocuous labour practice. This article draws on a review of international news coverage of unpaid internships between 2008 and 2015 and considers interviews with intern activists to document and contextualize the increasingly contentious issues at stake. Our analysis of media coverage identifies five recurrent media frames: employability, tough times, social mobility, legality, and backlash. While early news content tended to normalize unpaid work, unpaid internships were increasingly labelled as exploitative, illegal, and unfair. The coverage exhibited gaps and ideological strategies of containment, yet the case of unpaid internships appears to be an anomaly considering the difficulties that unions have tended to face in getting labour perspectives into mainstream media. We offer explanations for the extensive and often critical coverage of unpaid internships, highlighting media-savvy intern advocacy groups as particularly influential actors in shifting mainstream media narratives.

In summer 2015, a young New Zealander named David Hyde took an unpaid internship with the United Nations in Geneva [1]. Working for nothing in an expensive city, Hyde pitched a tent at Lake Geneva. As his makeshift accommodation made headlines internationally, Hyde revealed that the tent was a stunt to attract media attention: "I strongly believed that unpaid internships are unjust because they perpetuate inequality" (cited in Brooks-Pollock, 2015). The incident prompted a review of the United Nations (2016) internship program – the UN had 4,475 interns in 2014-15 – while Hyde (2015) used the spotlight to advocate for "the rights interns deserve". As part of a wider intern rights movement that has gained momentum since the late 2000s, Hyde's protest sits at the intersection of media coverage of unpaid internships and intern activism, the dual focus of this article.

For years, unpaid internships received little public scrutiny. The prevailing common sense was that internships are a win-win arrangement: employers get to test out a prospective employee at zero cost, while interns get experience, a resume line, and, perhaps, a 'foot in the door' to eventually obtain paid work. Over the past decade, however, critics have countered that unpaid internships privilege the wealthy, undervalue young workers' labour, often break minimum-wage law, and train workers to have low expectations of employers (see Perlin, 2011a). As Andrew Ross (2012: 23) writes, internships are "the fastest-growing job category of recent years for a large slice of educated youth trying to gain entry into workplaces that are leaner and meaner by the day". Political-economic perspectives on internships situate this form of quasi-employment within broader structural changes in capitalism over the past four decades, whereby the resultant reorganization of work allows employers to obtain "cheap dispensable labour" (Standing, 2016: 87). Historical accounts trace internships back to apprenticeships, in which young men were bound to master-craftsmen for three to ten years, and to 19th century medical students training in hospitals (Frenette, 2015; Palmer, 1992; Perlin, 2011a). Various kinds of internships existed in North America in the post-World War II period, generally in government and public service (Perlin, 2011a: 34), but paid and unpaid internships intensified in the 1980s and 1990s amid the shift to post-Fordist forms of production and neoliberal ideology.

The entrenchment of neoliberal policies since the 1970s has produced globalized markets, outsourcing, lean and flexible forms of production, and the privatization of state assets. This political-economic order became reliant on insecure forms of employment historically occupied by the least privileged of economic subjects, including women, immigrants, racialized individuals, youth, and other marginalized workers (Harvey, 2005; Millar, 2018). Standard employment relationships, enjoyed primarily by white, male citizen workers in the post-World War II era, continue to be replaced by precarious work – defined as "work for remuneration characterized by uncertainty, low income, and limited social benefits and statutory entitlements" (Vosko, 2010: 2). In a climate of rising insecurity and austerity as well as declining union density, unpaid internships have been added to the litany of precarious forms of work – part-time, seasonal, casual, temporary, and freelance – that are replacing full-time employment in the labour market (Lewchuk et al., 2015; Standing, 2016). Internships also result from lax enforcement of workplace laws as well as policy loopholes that enable widespread employment misclassification (see Cohen and de Peuter, 2015).

Perlin (2011a: 26) links the "explosion" of internships to the Great Recession, beginning in 2008. The confluence of financial collapse, bankruptcies, hiring freezes, soaring student debt, and rising unemployment pushed young graduates into unpaid work. The expansion of the intern economy has been bolstered by neoliberal discourses of entrepreneurship and individual competitiveness, which pressure workers to be flexible, self-reliant, and, increasingly, willing to work for free (Neff et al., 2005; Szemen, 2015). Such discourses have been particularly powerful in media, cultural, and entertainment industries, which encourage a surplus of aspiring workers to 'do what you love', no matter the cost (Tokumitsu, 2014). Research has singled out these so-called glamour industries as popular purveyors and normalizers of unpaid internships (Frederick, 1997; Klein, 2000). As Jim McGuigan (2016: 28) notes, young cultural workers "must be prepared to work for nothing at first (internships) and to spend their lives networking frantically, perpetually on the lookout for the next temporary contract". Internships can be viewed as a manifestation of the capitalist imperative to offload the risks and costs of production onto individual workers. The cumulative effects of serial internships and zero-wages include the hardening of established social exclusions in the labour

market, the devaluation of labour, wage depression across the economy and acclimatized, indebted workers hustling from gig to gig with few expectations of their employers.

Recent communication studies research has examined the class-, gender-, and race-based inequalities of intern work in the communication and cultural industries (Boulton, 2015; Oakley, 2013; Rodino-Colocino and Berberick, 2015; Shade and Jacobson, 2015); the use of interns in information-technology manufacturing (Chan et al., 2015); and representations of internships in film (Bulut, 2017), reality television (Mirrlees, 2015), and university publicity (Discenna, 2016; Einstein, 2015). To date, only one study has examined news media representations of internships (Scheuer and Mills, 2016). To recast an understanding of internships as an 'ethical problem', Scheuer and Mills examined excerpts and headlines of 2,572 *New York Times* articles to understand how interns were constructed by an influential media outlet. They identified three main subject-positions: interns as cheap labour, as non-employees, and as overworked. Each of these subject-positions serves to normalize the use of a cheap, 'easily expendable' workforce, which re-inscribes interns' lack of power and ultimately benefits managers and companies using such labour. Our study extends Scheuer and Mills's work through a media analysis that attends specifically to news frames that we read in relation to an intense period of intern-related activism.

Before internships were a topic of interest in communication and media studies, new activist groups in the UK, the US, Canada, Australia, and Europe were challenging the normalization of unpaid work (Chen and Ozich, 2015). Intern labour activists are young workers, students, cultural workers, interns past and present and their allies who have been mobilizing since the mid- to late-2000s. The global intern rights movement was motivated by a "sense of unfairness or injustice" and "a growing unease that interns were being exploited, that the promise of decent jobs after completing internships was . . . a mirage, and that unpaid internships were pricing people out of decent work" (Chen and Ozich, 2015: 19). Groups organizing around internship issues include: Intern Aware, Internocracy, and the Precarious Workers Brigade in the UK; Intern Labor Rights and the Canadian Intern Association in North America; Interns Australia; Generation Precaire in France; Repubblica Degli Stagisti in Italy; the Fair Internship Initiative at the United Nations; and the Hague Interns Association. Umbrella group the Global Intern Coalition has 25 member-organizations and holds an annual global intern strike. Intern activists, organized in formations ranging from activist collectives to "formalized incorporated bodies" (Chen and Ozich 2015: 19), have self-organized outside of dominant labour or political institutions (although many do work with trade unions). These activists use an expanding repertoire of tactics including protests; campaigns such as "Pay Your Interns"; lobbying government and policy makers; filing claims for wages owed; outreach and education; and using social media to call out companies that post online listings for unpaid internships.

Observing intern activism over the past five years while simultaneously sensing a shift in media narratives about unpaid internships motivated the research for this article. We ask: How are internship issues represented in mainstream news? What catalyzes the coverage? What sources are used? Whose voices set the terms of the debate? How are intern activists able to get their messages into mainstream media, and how do their actions shape media narratives about internships?

Using the international database ProQuest, we used the search term 'unpaid internship' to locate articles, features, op-eds, and columns about unpaid internships from English-language newspapers in countries where intern activism is present. These included, in order of prominence within the sample, the US, the UK, Canada, Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand. We set a seven-year time frame – January 2008 to October 2015 – to chart the change in coverage over an extended period that also corresponded to the intensification of intern activism (from around the time of the 2008 financial

crisis). In total, we collected 855 articles. We read and kept notes on each article, with attention to themes, sources, key words, and tone, to track patterns in how journalists make sense of unpaid internships, the implicit and explicit arguments in articles, and how sources shape the narrative. Taking an inductive approach, we derived a set of media frames from our notes to describe the mechanism by which the author selected, organized, and presented information. Such frames give news articles "emphasis and meaning", and constitute "the focus, a parameter or boundary, for discussing a particular event" (Altheide and Schneider 2013: 50, 53). We then re-read the notes, coding the articles by frame. Prior to and after our data collection, and as part of a larger research project on how cultural workers are responding to precarity, we conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 10 intern activists in Toronto, New York, and London between 2012 and 2017, either in person or via Skype (www.culturalworkersorganize.org). Although we selectively quote the interviews, they have informed our analysis of media framing of the unpaid internship issue.

Overall, our analysis suggests that the news media is a key site for fleshing out the terms of debate over internships, disseminating hegemonic ideas about unpaid internships while also revealing how dominant perspectives on this labour practice are challenged. This article is organized into three parts. First, from our examination of media coverage of unpaid internships, we identify five recurrent media frames: employability, tough times, social mobility, legality, and backlash. Our analysis is not strictly chronological, yet our sample displays a clear, albeit uneven, shift to more critical perspectives on unpaid internships. Second, we highlight persistent contradictions and gaps in the coverage. Third, we offer explanations for the widespread and often critical coverage, including dynamics internal to the political economy of journalism and the emergence of media-savvy intern activist groups. We note that intern activism appears to elude conventional journalistic constructions of labour and trade unions.

Tracking media coverage and intern activism together, we observe that coverage of internships shifted as activism around internships increased. Whereas early coverage tended to normalize unpaid work, in later years internships were labelled as exploitative, illegal, and unfair – what was once understood as a benign practice is considered a form of labour-market inequality. Heightened engagement with critical perspectives on internships in the news coverage corresponds to the growth of intern activism. Activists increasingly entered the coverage as sources, giving voice to perspectives that challenged rather than naturalized unpaid internships. This pattern in the coverage underpins our argument that intern activism is a key force in disrupting media narratives about unpaid work; beneath the struggle over meaning around internships is activist organization.

Media frames on internships

Our focus on mass media rests on the assumption that large, corporate-owned newspapers retain an agenda-setting function, and that their coverage has implications for public opinion and action. Mass media outlets remain a "significant social force in the forming and delimiting of public assumptions, attitudes, and moods…" (Gitlin, 1980: 9). They circulate narratives that not only index, but also enable or constrain how we make sense of internships, partly through the patterned use of media frames. Gitlin (6) describes media frames as "principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters". A frame, writes Park (2003: 146), is "a scheme of interpretation". Framing serves to position issues, events, ideas, and people, to promote a particular understanding, and to propose specific courses of action (Entman, 1993). Journalists rely on frames to communicate complex ideas, using "subtle suggestions" such as

"metaphors, historical examples, stereotypes, and images" (Kuehn, 2018: 404). Importantly, frames "[operate] by selecting and highlighting some features of reality while omitting others" (Entman, 1993: 53). This is evident in research demonstrating mainstream media's general tendency to frame labour issues in ideologically contained ways that uphold dominant political-economic interests (Martin, 2004: 7–17; Parenti, 1993). Yet as Kumar's (2007) study of news coverage of a UPS strike illustrates, media framing is not monolithic: collective social struggles can unsettle hegemonic narratives about labour.

Our media sample reveals a battle over ideas about unpaid internships that changed over time as intern activism intensified. Throughout 2008–9, the coverage largely endorsed unpaid internships, even as opposing perspectives periodically appeared – one *Financial Times* headline read "Tear Down this Rotten Edifice of Internships" (Skapinker, 2009). By 2010, the tone of the coverage shifted to pointed critique, particularly as American interns began to sue employers for legal misclassification, claiming they were in fact employees entitled to wages. By 2011, a charged debate over internships drove media coverage and intern rights advocates were cited regularly. By 2013, few stories about unpaid internships did not reference an activist group or the criticisms they advanced.

To understand the changing narrative, we surveyed media coverage of unpaid internships from 2008–2015 using a media framing perspective. We identify five recurrent frames in our sample: employability, tough times, social mobility, legality, and backlash. These frames were not mutually exclusive, nor did they progress linearly over time. The coverage, on balance, shifted to embrace a more critical position on unpaid internships, though dominant perspectives and uncritical endorsement did not entirely disappear. The wider relevance of these frames is twofold. They illustrate contemporary attitudes towards work and expectations of workers – particularly within labour markets for professional and high-prestige jobs under neoliberal conditions. They also confirm that media representations of labour conditions are contradictory, leaving space for views that challenge exploitation.

Employability

Employability is "an umbrella term used to describe the work of making oneself employable" (Hope and Figiel, 2015: 361). Discenna (2016: 438) refers to employability "as a requirement for workers to be in a constant state of constructing an 'employable' identity that includes not just a set of skills valued by potential employers … but also a set of attitudes and beliefs that accepts, indeed revels, in precariousness". During our sample period, news coverage adopted an employability frame by positioning unpaid internships as stepping stones in the school-to-work transition, a strategic way to gain a competitive edge in the job market, and as an essential route to gainful employment. The employability frame was predominant in early coverage and deployed rhetoric, story elements, and journalistic conventions that serve to normalize unpaid work.

The employability frame is exemplified by articles that provided interns with tips on how to obtain internships and succeed. Addressing students or their parents, these articles were popular in summer and had an instructional tone: "Want to land a full-time job after college? Get an internship or two, or even four or more" (Korkki, 2011). Experts and commentators outlined an intern code of conduct: be punctual, be assertive, network (Elmer, 2010). Interns were advised to invest as much effort as they would in a salaried job, yet were warned not to seem "too eager" by asking if an internship would become a paid position (Needleman, 2009). Overall, the employability frame accentuated the benefits of interning: a career training opportunity, a path to a dream job (Selvin, 2008), or "a way to secure

future references and job offers" (Korkki, 2008). Internships were repeatedly coded as an "investment" and lauded for providing "experience" and "contacts" as well as instilling "confidence".

A common narrative device was the anecdote of the former intern who had progressed to paid employment, often in fashion, publishing, or journalism. Articles suggested that they had their internship to thank. In addition to these interns, frequent sources included career counsellors, placement agencies, and employers. Companies using interns were portrayed as making a "sacrifice", as benevolent service providers giving youth the training needed to become fully-fledged workers. One article noted that "[e]mployers have to take the time and the energy to mentor and support the young person in the role" (Peacock, 2013). Quotes from executives reinforced the intern code of conduct. A fashion PR boss said, "I always hire the person who in the middle of the night sets a glass of water on my desk, or the one who washes the dishes, or changed the toilet paper rolls or the garbage bags…" (Niemietz, 2008).

Despite occasionally acknowledging the menial tasks involved, unpaid internships were frequently cast as "mutually beneficial" to interns and employers alike (Eaton and Omidvar, 2013). The notions that companies want to 'try out' a prospective employee and that unpaid internships function as auditions were assumed to be common sense. The employability frame amplified the employer's perspective. In one brash example, an executive's motive for using interns was explicit: "It's more money to the bottom line for you" (Chura, 2009). In early articles, non-payment tended to be accepted as fact, and internships generally received upbeat assessment. The consensus underpinning the employability frame was disrupted by activist voices, beginning in 2009 and becoming more prominent during 2011 and after. Representatives of intern rights groups became regular sources, adding pointed criticism to the coverage, beginning with the issue of nonpayment.

As the ethics of unpaid internships were questioned, efforts to sustain the employability frame became defensive. Reflecting journalists' attempts to achieve objectivity by presenting "both sides" of a story (Schudson, 1995: 13), pro-internship articles counterposed any pitfalls – no pay, for example – with the likelihood of a payoff. Justification, a pillar of the employability frame, manifested as a 'but' technique that was most pronounced in articles that quoted ambivalent interns: an unpaid internship in New York is expensive, but "it'll pay off in the long run" (Akam, 2009); a young person is frustrated about having completed a string of unpaid internships, but concluded, "the placements gave her confidence" (Groves, 2011); a former intern is asked if he felt exploited: "Kind of but I think it was mutual. I was using their name [on my resume]" (Rose, 2008). As intern activism gained momentum, recognition of potential problems with unpaid work moved closer to the top of articles. Under pressure, the employability frame waned over our sample period but did not entirely disappear.

The employability frame suppressed criticisms of unpaid work by designating internships as a necessity – a "prerequisite", "a fact of life", or "absolutely essential". "Whatever it takes, it's important that students do it", said one career counsellor (Carballo, 2009). Some articles went so far as to advocate "survival tactics" to cope with zero-wages, reinforcing the view that individuals ought to shoulder the burden (Allyn, 2009). Sources that propped up the employability frame – placement agencies and companies – had a vested interest in constructing unpaid internships as compulsory. Similarly, articles that profiled (or were written by) former interns who had progressed to paid employment served to cement internships as a "rite of passage" (Crouch, 2015): "I wouldn't be where I am now without doing my unpaid internship" (Butter, 2014). Yet as intern activists were added to journalists' source pools, the authority of employers and career counsellors was decentered. As critical voices disrupted the employability consensus, defenders of unpaid internships resorted to the

lens of choice. One columnist offered: "They are called 'unpaid' but they're not, really: they pay in experience. … No one puts a gun to the head of the people … who take these positions" (Coyne, 2014). The employability framing of internships has wide labour market relevance, if, as Discenna (2016: 446) writes, the "markers of the ideal intern are also the primary characteristics of the employable subject" writ large.

Tough times

Our second frame, tough times, appeared in coverage amid the financial crisis. Stressing macro-economic conditions, this frame was most prominent in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash but persisted in articles that addressed the difficulties students and recent graduates face in securing employment. The economic crisis served as an explanation of the unpaid internship phenomenon; typical articles referenced the "brutal job market" and high youth unemployment. Because internships were situated within broad economic conditions, this frame generated contradictory perspectives on unpaid work. On the one hand, pro-business apologetics were pronounced, especially in the 2008–2009 period. Coverage empathized with employers, and internships were represented as a cost-effective staffing strategy to cope with the downturn – from "a brilliant, recession-proof way to double your workforce" (Chura, 2009) to "very appealing to small-business owners contending with a difficult economy" (Rosenberg, 2009).

On the other hand, this frame prompted sympathy for young workers. Rather than the intern success story typical of the employability frame, a tough-times trope was the struggling jobseeker or the serial intern who "can't break free of the intern cycle" (Williams, 2014). Articles profiled a young person who did everything right but could not find work, before providing tips (e.g. Elmer, 2009). Such reportage merged with the employability frame. Embedded in the tough times frame was the suggestion that the economic climate required young workers to be more "competitive", as internships "dress up resumés" (McGuire, 2008), help applicants "stand out", and "provide a critical leg up" (Alex, 2008). Economic conditions tended to be coded as beyond control, and stories acknowledged that jobseekers "settle" for internships when jobs are scarce (Sherman, 2009). This frame, too, relied on career counsellors as sources who promoted interning as a way to cope with uncertainty in the "new world of work". Internships were considered "still the best alternative to unemployment for young people" (Goss, 2009).

The suggestion that young jobseekers should ride out the downturn through unpaid work was challenged most directly when interns, representatives of activist groups, or student unions provided a systemic perspective, either as sources or as authors of op-eds. Against the dominant employability narrative, these voices troubled the assumption that internships were freely chosen: "Students don't really have many options", one intern said (Southwick, 2014). Another article reported on a UK survey finding that "two thirds of young people felt obliged to work for free because of the recession" (Jefferies, 2009). Activist sources blamed unpaid internships for a lack of entry-level jobs for graduates. Debt was also raised as a critical, intersecting issue: "By soliciting unpaid labour", wrote one intern, "employers exacerbate students' indebtedness and further delay their capacity to earn" (Armstrong, 2013). Student researchers highlighted that many young interns were in a catch-22: "You get people who are desperate for work, they have student debt, they need to get experience…" (Smart, 2014).

Pay became a flashpoint issue in the tough times frame. Early in our sample, remuneration was usually mentioned in passing, with payment to interns seen as a bonus rather than a right. Over time, however, activists made nonpayment contentious, and coverage presented competing narratives of

value and worth. One article asked: "Unpaid work placements have increased during the recession. But who really benefits: employers or workers?" (Hauser, 2010). Youth expecting wages and benefits were sometimes addressed with condescension; one headline read "Graduates … Need Realistic Expectations" (*Telegraph*, 2013). That youth must "pay their dues" was a persistent premise, but by 2013, interns and their advocates challenged dominant narratives in growing numbers, asserting, for example, that the "callous nature of working unpaid … demoralises a person" (Ellis, 2014) or that "[y]oung people today are put in the impossible position of trading their self-worth just to survive" (Osorio, 2015). Support for payment to interns was expressed on grounds ranging from moral – "It is what is right, fair and proper" (Tresidder, 2013) – to national economic health: "Gen Y's problems in the work force affect the entire country's personal finances", wrote a columnist who urged government to press employers to hire full-time staff (Carrick, 2014).

Notable in our sample was the wide use of the term exploitation. Critics often labelled unpaid internships as "exploitative". Initially, the term exploitation was used in attention-getting headlines, usually designating the sense that individuals were being taken advantage of. Some articles noted the power imbalance in the intern-employer relationship, which prevents interns from speaking out. Mostly, though, the tough-times frame emphasized how young workers' aspirations and lack of opportunity were being exploited. One article claimed that the unpaid internship system "exploits the college students so desperate for work that they'll do menial jobs for free" (Hook and Sternberg, 2010), while another asserted that "employers are exploiting the hopes of unemployed young people" (Naughton, 2014). Specific cases of alleged intern exploitation, such as Ireland's controversial JobBridge scheme, received sustained attention. The most definitive statements that unpaid internships are exploitative came from interns and activists themselves, such as Intern Aware's Ben Lyons' piece "Real Work, No Pay … This is Nothing More than Exploitation" (2011). Overall, however, perspectives on exploitation were equivocal, illustrated by the headlines "Experience or Exploitation?" and "Unpaid Work can be Exploitative, but can also be helpful to Jobless Youth". Here the tough times frame mixed with the employability frame, with the implication that navigating difficult economic conditions requires individual coping strategies. But whereas the tough-times frame generated a mixed verdict on unpaid internships, our next two frames – social mobility and legality – took a more decisive stance.

Social mobility

Social mobility was the first frame to open space for sustained critical coverage of unpaid internships. Rather than emphasizing systemic factors underpinning internships, this frame highlighted the exclusion of certain social groups from the internship economy. Over our sample period, media coverage increasingly acknowledged that those who cannot afford to work for free are disadvantaged, and that class divisions are reinforced by limiting who can undertake periods of unpaid labour to obtain paid work. Overall, this frame tended to represent unpaid internships as a barrier to social mobility and as a practice that perpetuates inequality by denying economically marginalized youth opportunities for career advancement.

We found three prompts for coverage using the mobility frame. The first was the novelty of pay-to-intern programs. The second prompt, pronounced in British coverage, was the release of reports on social mobility by government and non-profit organizations, which identified barriers to working-class youth seeking entry to professions and linked internships to the role parents' earnings play in children's chances for professional success. Widely covered in the UK, *Unleashing Aspiration: The Final Report of the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions* (The Panel on Fair Access to the

Professions, 2009) effectively pushed the debate about internships into critical territory. Subsequent reports, such as a Sutton Trust study, highlighted class-based exclusion and generated headlines declaring "Unpaid Internships 'Closed to all but the Super-Rich'" (Paton, 2014). The third prompt for the mobility frame in British media concerned the alleged hypocrisy of politicians. For example, a 2009 media report on a government plan to "boost 'social mobility' by stopping the middle classes gaining unfair advantage for their children" (Walters and Owen, 2009) pointed to the class privilege of government officials (e.g. private schools). Coverage of a 2011 government commitment to "reverse the growing culture of unpaid internships" called then Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, whose father had helped him get an internship, a hypocrite (Stratton, 2011).

The mobility frame inserted an ethical discourse into internship coverage. Raising issues of fairness, mobility-framed coverage used terms like "advantaged", "privileged", and "haves and have nots". Variations on the phrase "those who can afford to work for free" appeared frequently (Shingler, 2014). Occasionally, unpaid interns were quoted as feeling "lucky" to have their parents' financial support. On balance, however, this frame produced critical coverage, reflected in such headlines as "The New Elitism that is Freezing Out Poorer Graduates" (Curtis, Friend and Jones, 2009). Unpaid internships, summarized one journalist, "privilege the already advantaged who are able to work for free, while adding additional barriers for everyone else" (McGuinness, 2008). This frame frequently focused on prestigious professions and, increasingly, noted the social consequences of restricted access to political and media careers: "What will it mean for journalism", asked one writer, "when the next line-up of reporters all come from one part of town?" (Urback, 2013). On class-based exclusion, another said, "This fact is especially damaging in journalism, which should be going out of its way to draw in a wide variety of voices, which translate to good coverage of society as a whole" (Mullally, 2013).

Backed by official reports, the mobility frame invited reflection on class. One *Guardian* piece, for instance, argued that while unpaid internships may pay off eventually, social divisions blocked working-class youth from even reaching an unpaid internship. It also noted the differences between unpaid workers who would land professional jobs later and those who would always work minimum wage jobs (Hanley, 2009). While class-based exclusion was an early focus in British media, by 2013, class was a prominent theme in North American coverage, too. One *Washington Post* article remarked that "unpaid internships - whatever their value and whatever the various legal questions may be that surround them - are not exactly an exercise in equality" (McGregor, 2013). The mobility frame advanced structural critique, often via activist voices: a Trades Union Congress member spoke of "entrenching inequality" (Farhat, 2014); journalist Owen Jones (2014) named the "class system" as shaping access to unpaid internships; and Canadian activists asserted that the unpaid internship system "perpetuates … intergenerational inequities" (Seaborn et al., 2015). Activists' solutions included paying the minimum wage, enforcing law, and developing improved policy around internships. Some articles using the mobility frame voiced the position that activists' efforts removed advancement opportunities: one article suggested that '"intern advocates' ought to be advocating for more internships – unpaid or barely paid" (Bachelder, 2013). The predominant stance expressed in the mobility frame, however, was that unpaid internships worsen rather than mitigate inequality, ultimately disrupting the assumption that the labour market is meritocratic.

Legality

In early coverage, it was not uncommon to encounter a story such as the one about a 40-hour per week unpaid internship at a casino with no mention of the legality of such an arrangement

(Wereschagin, 2008). Laws around internships were sporadically cited during 2008 and 2009, with some US articles noting the six-point test that determines whether someone is an employee and a wage is required under the *Fair Labor Standards Act* (FLSA). It was not until 2010 when legality emerged as a predominant frame. Whereas our previous frames left room for varying positions on unpaid internships, the legality frame tended to generate a clear-cut stance. By 2010, journalists were confident in their assessment that unpaid, not-for-school-credit internships were illegal. Instead of career advisors and other standby sources, the legality frame relied on lawyers, whose professional voice lent credibility to the intern rights movement.

The legality frame was driven by lawsuits over unpaid internships. One notable case was inspired by media coverage of legal issues. In a *New York Times* article, labour reporter Steven Greenhouse (2010) wrote about investigations into internships' violation of minimum wage law, and quoted a federal Labor Department representative: "If you're a for-profit employer or you want to pursue an internship with a for-profit employer, there aren't going to be many circumstances where you can have an internship and not be paid and still be in compliance with the law". Greenhouse's article was subsequently discussed in many publications. Eric Glatt, an unpaid intern on the movie *Black Swan*, read Greenhouse's article and was inspired to sue Fox Searchlight Pictures for misclassification, ultimately winning back wages (Weitzenkorn, 2012). The *Black Swan* case was widely covered and prompted other lawsuits; payments were awarded to interns from companies in media and cultural industries, which in turn generated wide coverage. Using plaintiffs and intern activists as sources, the legality frame sharpened the language describing unpaid internships. A *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* article, for example, quoted the term "institutionalized wage theft" (Hananel, 2013).

Violation of minimum-wage law was a recurring theme in the legality frame. Early in the sampled coverage, UK newspapers were most likely to advise on relevant law. The FLSA six-point test was first mentioned in our sample in 2009 and reproduced in many US articles during 2013 and after. A similar framework exists and was reported on in Canada. Unlike the employability frame, which positioned interns' employers as benevolent service providers, the legality frame cast them as suspect or described them as "breaking the law" (Chown Oved, 2014). Legality-framed pieces often quoted intern activist groups (e.g., Interns Anonymous, Intern Aware) and, to a lesser extent, unions, as well as intern advocate Ross Perlin, author of *Intern Nation: How to Earn Nothing and Learn Little in the Brave New Economy*. The legality frame was present from the beginning of coverage in Canada, where lawyers have been the most outspoken critics of internships. Activist groups the Canadian Intern Association and Students Against Unpaid Internship Scams were founded by law students; legality and policy change have been their focus. Beyond lawsuits, this frame was prompted by government investigations, especially in the UK, where HM Revenue and Customs inquiries are generally widely covered. The legality frame was also propelled by formal complaints such as one against Bell Mobility in Canada, as well as the lack of intern protection from sexual harassment in the US.

Following the lawsuit wave, articles began to counsel businesses on how to avoid "legal exposure": "These lawsuits should serve as a warning to employers that the initial 'bargain' of an unpaid internship can ultimately amount to a significant liability…" (Windsor, 2013). Staunch pro-employer positions crept into coverage – "Should US courts rule the practice illegal, 'We would simply hire more interns overseas, as our interns can work remotely from anywhere'" (Schorr, 2014) – one article referred to unpaid interns as "chum for circling lawyers" (Belser, 2013). Such perspectives were marginal, however, compared to coverage that advocated compliance with minimum wage law. One *New York Times* article attributed intern-led lawsuits to insufficient

regulation: "proper enforcement of labor law shouldn't depend on exploited interns' willingness to suffer through courtroom ordeals" (Lapidos, 2013). In Canada, too, coverage highlighted activists' calls for enforcement and policy change. Later in our sample period, legality-framed articles generated headlines such as "Unpaid Internships may Become a Thing of Past" (Moody, 2014). This suggested that intern activists had prevailed. Yet, near the end of our sample, the Fox Searchlight case returned, with reports that the initial ruling was vacated. This prompted an op-ed by Perlin (2015) advising intern rights activists that "Organizing efforts on college campus[es] and in workplaces should intensify – the legal route alone is insufficient".

Backlash

Criticism of unpaid internships, as we have seen, became increasingly pronounced in coverage over time. Our next frame, backlash, arose as the debate about unpaid internships itself drove coverage. References to "heated debate" (Shingler, 2014) and similar phrases became commonplace. The backlash frame amplified campaigners' voices, spotlighted activist interventions, and presented opposition to unpaid internships as the prevailing stance. This suggested, as one article put it, that the "mentality is changing" (Fernie, 2013). The backlash frame registered a shift in public opinion, expressed in the headline, "Is Internship a Dirty Word?" (Beck, 2014). Backlash became apparent in 2011 – particularly in the UK, where it first appeared, and in Canada. In both countries, such stories proliferated in 2013–2014. This frame cast supporters of unpaid internships as the new detractors: rejection of this labour practice was the normative position that supporters had to confront. When this happened, the frame also encompassed backlash *against* the backlash.

The backlash frame was sustained by the alleged unscrupulous use, or dubious endorsement, of unpaid internships. Such controversies often reached news outlets via manifestations of "backlash in social media" (Shore, 2013). Several events fueled backlash, including Hootsuite's mea culpa when the social media company issued back pay to unpaid interns after being named and shamed by activists for breaching employment standards. Another case concerned the retraction of an unpaid internship posting at Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg's Lean In Foundation following an "online uproar" (Hickman, 2013). Blunder was a staple story element, whether it was a pharmaceutical giant that promoted paid participation in clinical trials to subsidize unpaid work, or a law school initiative asking waged legal interns to donate a day's pay to unpaid classmates. In the UK, backlash coverage peaked following the tragedy of Moritz Erhardt, a young intern who died after working punishing hours at the London office of a multinational bank. In Canada, backlash flared when the Governor of the Bank of Canada advised youth, "Get some real-life experience even though you're discouraged, even if it's for free" (cited in Grant, 2014). Asked to comment on the governor's statement, a Canadian Intern Association spokesperson rebutted: "It's a complete misunderstanding of our employment and workplace laws in Canada … and it shows a huge devaluing of young people and recent graduates' abilities in the workplace" (cited in Grant, 2014).

With activists now firmly installed as sources, intern advocacy underpinned backlash coverage. Reports by progressive think tanks, unions, and intern rights groups received coverage, and campaigners attempted to shape the debate by writing op-eds and inserting phrases such as "illegal internships" into their soundbites. Backlash coverage highlighted the political impact of intern activism. One article about a UK government investigation, for example, noted: "The action comes after Intern Aware, which campaigns against abuses of the internship process, passed the government a list of more than 100 companies which were advertising unpaid work…" (Harris, 2013). Reflecting heightened public interest in the unpaid internship issue, UK election coverage reported on the Labour

Party's commitment to compel payment to interns after four weeks, a position credited to Intern Aware. The backlash frame acknowledged efforts to promote institutional change. There were reports on a petition to stop a university career center from advertising unpaid internships and quotes from activists calling on the government to strengthen and enforce existing regulations. In Canada, an MP's private member's bill that sought to protect precarious workers, interns included, received coverage, and the MP joined the intern-beat source pool: "Young people are looking at a labour market where instead of finding an entry-level position you have to work for free" (cited in McKnight, 2013).

The backlash frame allowed recognition of social inequalities in the intern economy beyond class, although this matter surfaced only rarely. Responding to the lack of official data collection on internships, one report publicized the results of a survey by two Canadian student-researchers, who found that young women were over-represented in unpaid internships (Goodman, 2014). Few articles spoke to race-based inequities in unpaid internships, although one piece by a public relations executive cited relevant industry association research, which "revealed that 24% of interns are non-white, a far higher proportion than in the industry as a whole (9%)…" (Howell, 2014). The backlash frame drew attention to the lack of social protections for unpaid interns, including those against sexual harassment, and to the power differential between interns and employers that prevents interns from speaking out. This frame also highlighted the role of higher education institutions – Perlin (2011b) called them "complicit colleges" – in facilitating unpaid internships.

However, backlash against unpaid internships generated its own backlash. Lawsuits and government actions that compelled several media companies to close their internship programs triggered diverse responses. A widely covered Canadian story is illustrative. In 2014, the Ministry of Labour in the Province of Ontario delivered compliance orders to Toronto-based magazines after inspections, undertaken amid pressure from intern activists, found violations of employment standards. Rather than pay the legally mandated minimum wage, the magazines let the interns go. The enforcement effort sparked news articles, op-eds, and columns critical of the government. An important motif in the backlash against the backlash was lament for lost "opportunities". One headline declared, "Crackdown on Unpaid Internships in Ontario is Bittersweet for Some" (Copeland, 2014). First-person chronicles, several from young and aspiring media workers, expressed the worry that "crackdowns on unpaid internships are going to cost a lot of young people like myself the chance of a lifetime" (Martha, 2014). Such narratives of diminished opportunities revived the dominant perspectives that earlier circulated through the tough times and employability frames, in which unpaid internships were understood as "investments" and stepping stones to gainful employment.

Gaps and limits

Based on our article sample, the case of unpaid internships does not neatly fit critical scholarly research on news representations of work and labour, which finds that pro-labour perspectives are marginalized and labour politics stories are filtered through a consumer lens (Martin, 2004; Puette, 1992). By contrast, our news frame analysis reveals an intensifying struggle over meaning within coverage of unpaid internships. Journalists provided socio-economic context, albeit unevenly. They frequently relied on activists as sources and empathized with unpaid interns. Still, as we noted at the outset, media frames accentuate certain aspects of an issue while omitting others (Entman, 1993). In our sample, media narratives about unpaid internships contained gaps and limits in regard to inequalities, of age, gender, race, and class in particular.

A small number of articles acknowledged older interns – a group typically depicted as a novelty (e.g. the "returnship"). Most coverage, however, assumed that unpaid interns were university graduates or young workers at the beginning of their careers. Other groups of workers were ignored. New immigrants, for example, also face pressure to accept unpaid work as a means of obtaining nationally recognized experience. Aside from occasional references within the backlash frame, media coverage rarely confronted gender- and race-based inequities. Preliminary research indicates that more women than men undertake unpaid internships, which reflects and reinforces gendered divisions in the labour market (Attfield and Couture, 2014). That many young women are unpaid interns and that unpaid labour is historically feminized barely registered in the media coverage. Race was even less prominent. Some articles referenced "diversity" when discussing the need to expand access to the professions (e.g. Ross, 2014). Only a rare article, however, made direct reference to "students of colour" (Raghavendran, 2014) or to how "[r]ace, class, and ethnicity shape the opportunities presented to young people" (Malveaux, 2014). The lack of attention to unpaid interns' social location also reflects the dearth of reliable data on internships.

Over the course of our sample, articles increasingly noted that people who cannot afford to work for free cannot take unpaid internships without incurring debt or holding a second job. Although class-based exclusion was a pronounced theme in the coverage, the framing of class was nonetheless contained. Phrases such as "economic elite" (Eaton and Omidvar, 2013) were reserved for those interns from well-off families rather than, say, the executives atop vast media companies that enlist unpaid interns. Similarly, while the language of exploitation suffused the coverage, its meaning was circumscribed, never expressing capital's inherent logic. The implicit message was that when interns received payment they were no longer exploited, foreclosing the view that unpaid work is intrinsic to the labour-capital relation. The containment of class was evident, too, when the coverage did not link unpaid internships with other forms of precarious work. Although the news coverage acknowledged that minimum wage laws were a key point in intern activists' efforts, few articles made substantive connections with low-waged workers' campaigns for increased living and minimum wages, such as "Fight for $15 and Fairness" in Canada and "Fight for $15" in the US.

Accounting for critical coverage

Despite some gaps and limits, the extensive and critical coverage that unpaid internships received in mainstream media contrasts with the difficulty that unions have historically faced in getting labour voices represented, and with the tendency of commercial news media to report on labour primarily at moments of industrial conflict. As Kumar (2007: 37) notes in the US context, such reportage "perpetuates the myth of a classless American society". Kumar (2007: 164) maintains, however, that media institutions are not "impervious to social pressure". While dominant views are upheld in privately owned commercial media where journalistic routines ideologically support the status quo, resistant ideas are nonetheless able to breach official discourse. With the backing of "collective struggle", such ideas can potentially "impact the overall tone of media coverage" (Kumar, 2007: 50). Our frame analysis confirms this possibility; as collective struggle around unpaid internships emerged and deepened, the status quo acceptance of internships was challenged. What accounts for the frequently sympathetic coverage of unpaid internships? We propose three explanations.

First, we point to dynamics internal to the political economy of journalism. As Gitlin (1980: 4) notes, "for commercial as well as professional reasons, [newspapers] cannot afford to ignore big ideological change". Heightened unpaid internship coverage coincided with a cataclysmic socio-

economic event, the Great Recession. Its reverberations and revelations of high unemployment and massive income inequality left few untouched. Within a wider media effort to capture the zeitgeist of hard times, reporting on the plight of interns would have been a relatively straightforward angle for journalists. They would have likely undertaken internships themselves and worked alongside others in the same position. Journalists would further understand that in the contemporary news industry jobs are disappearing and becoming more precarious. Market pressures on news organizations would also guide decisions to encourage unpaid internship stories. Abiding by the logic of the "audience commodity" (Smythe, 1981), journalists and editors may imagine the popular resonance of such coverage. For advertising purposes, commercial outlets seek to attract middle-class readers, many of whom could be anxiously concerned about their children's career success and livelihoods.

Second, we highlight the emergence of media-savvy intern activist groups. The power imbalance in the intern-employer relationship makes interns reluctant to confront or publicly call out employers. Unpaid interns have, however, found voice, strength, and solidarity online, particularly through the affordance of anonymized communication. Online outlets and social media is where unpaid interns disclose their experiences and develop critiques of the intern economy. The UK-based website Interns Anonymous, which aggregated first-person intern experiences, was often sourced in the early UK coverage. Intern Aware, one of the most prominent intern activist voices in UK media, grew from a Facebook group. Twitter has enabled a variety of groups and individuals to name and shame employers and share stories of intern injustice. The most trenchant, critical writing about unpaid internships occurs on social media platforms – #payyourinterns is a popular hashtag – and youth-focused digital news sites. Since journalists are avid social media users, further research could, we hypothesize, trace a loop from critical online commentaries about unpaid internships to their reproduction in mainstream news. Our article sample suggests that activists were most successful at inserting a critique of internships into the news coverage once they had organized into named groups and developed an online presence. This fostered visibility, established credibility, and satisfied journalists' need for "expert" sources.

Our frame analysis reveals that media coverage of unpaid internships took a critical turn as journalists began to rely on activists, lawyers, and interns themselves as sources. These voices consistently and forcefully disrupted the affirmative employability frame that predominated in our sample's early years when career counsellors and the companies that placed interns were the go-to sources. Pointed criticisms entered coverage by way of spokespeople from activist organizations. Our article sample featured a short list of regularly quoted intern advocacy groups such as Interns Anonymous, Intern Aware, Canadian Intern Association, and Students Against Unpaid Internship Scams. These groups became important agents in the coverage. They provided reporters with sources – young, articulate intern activists with well-packaged soundbites – and ready-to-publish op-eds. Our interviews confirm that these activists built relationships with journalists. For example, shortly after Claire Seaborn co-founded the Canadian Intern Association and registered its domain name, she became a sought-after source. In turn, the media attention lent legitimacy to her fledgling organization. Learning to work her media contacts, Seaborn (2015, personal communication) said, "100 percent of the time that I've called a reporter to write on an issue, they have".

Capitalizing on the news media's event-orientation (Manning, 1998), intern activists prompted coverage through public interventions. They organized protests, wrote open letters, delivered petitions, instigated lawsuits, lobbied politicians, named and shamed employers, and campaigned to ban the listing of unpaid internships at universities. These events gave journalists fresh angles on the intern issue, and mounting media coverage strengthened intern activists' cases against employers.

During the 2010s, pressure from activists against companies like Hootsuite, the London Symphony Orchestra, and the British Film Institute forced the payment of interns. Such episodes suggest a climate of growing intolerance for unpaid internships, which likely emboldened some journalists to cover internships critically. The press attention was coextensive with activists' media relations. Intern Aware's Gus Baker (2013, personal communication) remarked that "our media is quite responsive … we're quite good at working out what papers will write up and what they won't, and turning little things into big scandals". The spotlight on unpaid internships, coupled with journalists' reliance on activists as sources, expanded the agency of intern advocates in their dealings with employers. For example, when a supermarket giant ran an ad for an unpaid intern, Baker said that he contacted the company to point out the coverage Intern Aware had received, which spurred the retailer to make the position paid.

Third, it is important to note that criticisms of unpaid internships eluded journalistic conventions of representing labour issues. Journalists' openness to discussions of class, unfair labour practices, and workers' rights campaigns, as well as the embrace of activist sources, may have been because intern advocacy mostly operates outside of unions. News organizations generally cover union activity in a formulaic way (see Glasgow Media Group, 1976; Martin, 2004). Intern activism frequently falls within the ambit of "alt-labor", groups that support workers who are not legally able to join a union (Eidelson, 2013). Multiplying in recent years, such groups do not carry the ideological baggage that unions present to reporters. In internship struggles, there is often no single employer to advocate on capital's behalf. There is no 'union boss' to quote, no strike to cover, no inconvenienced consumer with whom to empathize. If journalism's alt-labour script is yet to be written, intern activists demonstrate how savvy outreach strategies can disrupt media narratives on certain labour issues. A corollary explanation for mainstream media's receptiveness to criticisms of unpaid internships is that activist demands – payment of wages and respect for law – are hardly radical. Indeed, extensive coverage of unpaid internships may derive in part from the practice's failure to respect basic capitalist tenets such as waged labour, state enforcement of labour market regulations, and meritocracy. From this standpoint, efforts to challenge unpaid internships are marked by contradiction: they fight against exploitation in the form of unpaid work, but they also uphold logics that enable and support capitalist exploitation.

Conclusion

This article reviewed media coverage of unpaid internships from 2008–2015. Based on our sample of 855 articles, we identified and illustrated five recurrent frames: employability, tough times, mobility, legality, and backlash. Our frame analysis found that unpaid internships became an increasingly contentious subject in mainstream print media over our sample period. The coverage clearly, yet unevenly, assimilated critical perspectives on this labour practice over time. We argued that intern-led organizations were an especially important actor in shifting media narratives on internships. We highlighted the role of media-savvy intern advocates – alongside lawyers and interns themselves – in disrupting the commonsense viewpoint that unpaid internships are innocuous. Our analysis reveals that a variety of critiques initially forwarded by activists became cemented in the coverage: that unpaid internships favor those who can afford to work for free; are undertaken by young workers who under difficult conditions often have little choice but to take them; leave interns without basic protections; frequently break the law; and are insufficiently regulated. Media coverage

of unpaid internships was not immune to ideological strategies of containment. Nevertheless, intern activists had less difficulty than unions in getting labour perspectives heard in mainstream media.

Internship coverage suggests that news media remain a space where dominant labour practices are not only legitimized but also can, under specific social conditions, be disputed. One way to build upon our research would be to undertake a similarly modelled study of coverage of the Fight for $15 campaign, whose protagonists are disproportionately low-wage, racialized workers in the service sector. Such a study would allow news representations of precarious work across divisions of race, class, and occupation to be comparatively assessed. In internship coverage itself, some journalists have argued that the media spotlight on unpaid internships has altered employer behaviour: "media scrutiny … has heightened awareness and motivated companies to make their [internship] programs compliant" (Matthews, 2013, A21). This, of course, is the strategic intent of intern activists' media relations. They seek to compel institutional action against unpaid internships and to shift media narratives as a step towards changing employer sensibilities. As one activist put it, one of the goals was to promote "the idea of it being icky to hire unpaid interns" and to "pay interns instead" (Baker, 2013, personal communication). Shaping public opinion via news media is a necessity for labour advocates whose constituency lacks collective representation in the workplace. Actions against unpaid internship issues in the past decade – heightened enforcement, policy reforms, young workers' courage to talk back, and the caution an employer might exercise before advertising an unpaid position – are shaped by multiple sources, including, we have stressed, interns' practices of self-representation. Intern activists tell us that the battle against unpaid internships is far from over. Still, the discourse surrounding this form of unpaid work has demonstrably changed over the past decade. To return to a headline from our media sample, it is uncertain whether "internship" will, in any lasting way, be a "dirty word". What is clear, however, is that the internship is no longer a practice only those in power can frame.

Author Bios

Nicole S Cohen is an Assistant Professor at the University of Toronto (Institute of Communication, Culture, Information and Technology and the Faculty of Information). She is the author of *Writers' Rights: Freelance Journalism in a Digital Age* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), which received the 2017 Gertrude J. Robinson Book Prize from the Canadian Communication Association. She has published research in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *Digital Journalism*, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, and *Feminist Media Studies*. She collaborates on the research project Cultural Workers Organize (culturalworkersorganize.org).

Greig de Peuter is an Associate Professor at Wilfrid Laurier University in the Department of Communication Studies. He is co-author of *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009) with Nick Dyer-Witheford. His research is published in the *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Canadian Journal of Communication*, and *Journal of Cultural Economy*. He collaborates on the research project Cultural Workers Organize (culturalworkersorganize.org).

Endnote

[1] Cohen and de Peuter currently serve on the advisory board of the Canadian Intern Association, a non-profit advocacy organization.

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