

A Study of the Plight of Media Industry Interns: Manufactured Consent in the Labor Process

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Abstract: The media industry is currently undergoing industrial upgrading and transformation, with some traditional positions at risk of being replaced by automation and digitization. Therefore, younger employees who are more aware of the new situation are required. Besides, media companies are facing the challenge of declining revenues since the COVID-19 outbreak has put pressure on the media market. Overall, employment opportunities have been affected in the short term but changes and developments in the industry will bring new employment needs and opportunities. In this case, interns become an important part of the media industry workforce. This paper analyzes the social factors behind the "ideal game" and youth anxiety in the media industry from the perspective of "labor consent". Findings show that interns in the media industry in the digital age are expected to be "progressive", but the reality reflects a conflict between high expectations and de-skilled work, as well as a contradiction between the desire for self-control over a lifetime and the possession of the body. The overemphasis on the quantity of work experience possessed by workers leads to a neglect of quality, and quantitative rationality becomes a paradox of work experience. Under unbalanced conditions of supply and demand, false "labor consent" created by the "ideal game" is manufactured among young people. They repeatedly engage in de-skilled work in an attempt to accumulate internships in order to secure a future of discretionary time.

Keywords: Interns, Labor consent, Ideal game, Media industry

1. Introduction

Labor, as one of the core activities of human society, has always received extensive attention and research. In the field of sociology, the theoretical discussion of labor covers many levels, one of which is the in-depth consideration of why workers work hard. Michael Burawoy discusses the reasons why workers actively participate in and even work hard in his classic book *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism*. He points out that when workers face harsh and boring working conditions, they find self-identity and satisfaction in seemingly monotonous labor by introducing a competition component that gives meaning to their work and earns them respect among their colleagues [1]. This mode of competition is called "the game of catching up with work", and from this, many other modes of exchanging labor consent with the competition mode are derived, such as "the gender game" and "the boss game".

However, the form of labor consent has also changed with time. Under the traditional employment system, laborers' resistance was often hidden behind the appearance of "consent," which was strategically disguised by both superficial and deeper camouflage. In recent years, with the rise of flexible forms of employment, traditional labor has gradually evolved into digital labor, and labor control has gradually incorporated workers' active consent and complex subjective feelings. This change has led to the need to revisit the notion of labor consent and delve into how workers maintain their identification and acceptance of their work in a constantly changing work environment.

Taking media interns as the research object, this paper delves into the labor dilemmas interns face in a competitive job market and explores how they cope with the complex reality of work behind labor consent. Through case studies, the author takes the theoretical framework of labor consent as a starting point for an in-depth analysis of the aspects of competition, identity, labor control, and self-regulation that interns experience in media organizations. This research not only contributes to a better understanding of the nature of contemporary labor relations but also provides a basis for future in-depth research on labor consent and labor dilemmas.

2. The Concept and Change of Labor Consent

2.1. The Concept of Labor Consent

Labor consent is a key concept in sociology that deals with workers' acceptance, identification, and commitment to the nature of work. Michael Burawoy and Alfred Buehler Burawoy provide an insightful theoretical explication in *Manufacturing Consent: Transforming the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism*. According to them, labor consent is not simply a worker's affirmation of work, but a phenomenon shaped within capitalist relations of production and influenced by upper management and economic structures. This concept emphasizes the fact that workers are not only mechanical performers in carrying out their tasks but also active participants in social relations, achieving their goals through their identification with their work.

Labor consent is formed through class resistance to the work process and active participation in the conditions of production. By introducing an element of competition, workers can give more meaning to their work, pursuing goals and respect while striving for peer recognition. This positive identification with labor can not be simply called "false". It is shaped in a complex social and economic context.

2.2. Young Digital Laborers

The form of labor consent changes as social structures evolve. Under traditional employment regimes, labor consent often masked the resistance of workers, who strategically camouflaged themselves through superficial and deep-seated behaviors. In the digital age, "labor time is not limited to the time that a worker is employed in direct productive activities but is present throughout his or her existence" [2]. The control of labor has become more insidious, and the "time margins" of individual lives have been broken. The original working hours have been lengthened, the imbalance between the amount of information and the number of working hours has led to "time poverty", labor consent does not only take place in the workplace, and the influence of production relations on the life of the workers has been strengthened. The "politics of production" is gradually shifting to the "politics of life" in the digital age [3].

3. Fierce Competition Among Interns

Since the COVID-19 epidemic, the employment situation in the media industry has produced large changes. On the one hand, online offices have increased the impact of the digital age. On the other hand, the media industry has been restructured, and the company's overall revenue slows down, resulting in more intense competition in the job market. In a 2022 performance forecast list of 90 companies within the A-share media segment, 38 listed companies made a profit and 52 made a loss. The Century Huatong made the largest loss (7.0 billion yuan). Compared with the same period in 2022 and 2020, the number of profitable companies in 2023H1 has increased to varying degrees but still slightly less than the same period in 2021. The number of companies that realized profits reached 112 in the Q2 of 2023, and the number of companies that can realize profits after deducting non-recurring gains and losses reached 103. Both numbers have increased to varying degrees compared with the Q1 (as seen in Figure 1).

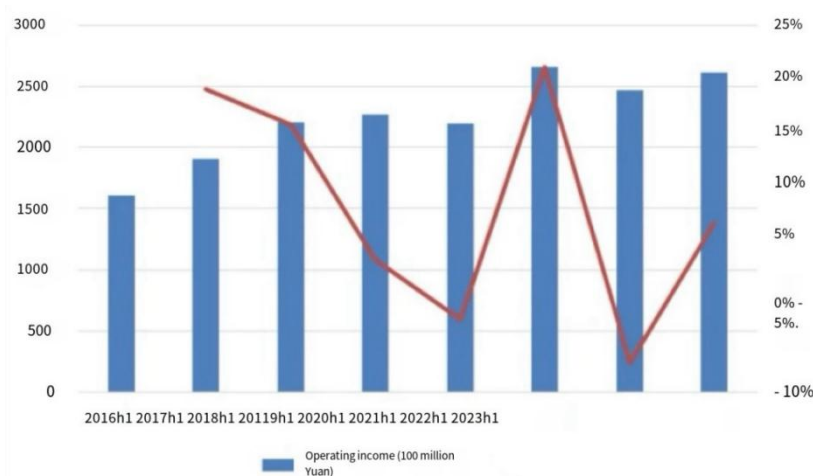


Figure 1: Business income of media segment from 2016H1-2023H1 (Source from Centaline Securities).

Coupled with post-Fordist influences, precarious hiring is becoming a notable trend, with increased job uncertainty and further blurring of the line between education and work stages. College students are entering internships earlier and earlier, and the duration of internships continues to lengthen, which, in addition to intensifying the "aggressive game", further enhances the instability of enterprises' employment and creates a new industry ecology.

4. Underlying Contradictions and Physical Resistance

4.1. De-skilled Labor of Interns

The internship itself is both educational experience and work experience, but the de-skilled and repetitive labor deprives interns of the power to acquire knowledge in the process of work. Harry Braverman has pointed out that capital realizes the process of the deskilling of workers by separating "conception" and "execution" through the scientific management of labor. The process of deskilling is achieved through the separation of "conception" and "execution" through the scientific management of labor, which deprives the worker of control over the labor process [4].

In the media industry, interns are often assigned tasks such as data entry, filing, or administrative duties that require few skills or critical thinking. Not only do these tasks fail to realize interns'

potential, but they also limit their opportunities for meaningful skill development and intellectual engagement, exacerbating the de-skilling of the internship experience.

Breverman's theory reveals the structural dynamics of interns experiencing de-skilled labor, highlighting the fact that capitalist production processes prioritize efficiency and cost-effectiveness over the realization of workers' potential. By examining the intern's role in the organization through the lens of de-skilled labor, the systemic forces at play and the implications for the intern's professional development and well-being can be better understood.

4.2. Analyzing Interns' Reconstruction of the Meaning of Work

In the media industry, the "ideals game" plays an important role in capital's control of interns' labor. On the one hand, schools use internships as an important means of shaping the professional values of media industry students, encouraging them to use internships as a means of improving their professional skills rather than as necessary labor to create value. Unpaid, low-paid internships are viewed as a reasonable means of self-development for students and a necessary sacrifice in the fight for the ideal of journalism. In addition, the internship semester and the appearance of internship credits rigidly link the internship experience to the academic level, and college students are regarded as members of the backbone of the labor force even before they become full-time employees. On the other hand, in the process of labor, the seemingly "flexible" office model of the media industry conceals the encroachment of interns' lifetime, and the boundaries between work and life are broken down. The system of moral evaluation that permeates lives makes interns powerless to reject the fact that they are "free labor," and the position of authority legitimizes unpaid labor, equating the exploitation of interns with the so-called ideals of journalism.

It can be said that the interns' acceptance of the "back-paying" internship reflects the imbalance of power in the labor-management game. In a system of unbalanced supply and demand, there is a great disparity of power and authority between interns and organizations, as well as a lack of a good bargaining mechanism, making it necessary for interns to bear the costs of internships on their own and form a harsh self-management [5].

5. Ideology and the Illusion of Reality

5.1. Interns' Delayed-reward Mentality and "Waithood" Anxiety

For young people, enduring the difficulties of the internship is a kind of delayed reward behavior, and with the continuous turbulence of the job market, people's anxiety about "waithood" is also rising. Waiting has become a common social phenomenon, increasing the sense of crisis among college students, and the "waste" of a lifetime is a future that all people may face. Under such pressure, going to the internship is an important means of turning the uncertain future into a controllable present, exchanging the unstable labor of the present (putting in labor as a flexible worker) for a stable future after graduation and exchanging the management of uncertainty in the present labor practice for the delayed return that can be expected in the future [6].

Waithood contains a "politics of waiting" that encourages passivity, restraint, and self-management [7], normalizing and legitimizing dominant power relations or current labor dilemmas by directing the individual's attention to the future [8]. It is worth noting that not all interns are governed by the "ideal game", and some of them only want a stable job and time to "do what they like" in addition to satisfying their own needs in life. Therefore, power is not a measure of delayed gratification, and autonomous time management is the goal that most people strive for. Observed from this perspective, the so-called "ideal game" is actually just a kind of superficial aggressiveness, and behind it is the precise calculation of the value of a lifetime. The educational

significance of the internship itself is obscured, and lifetime is quantified as data on a resume, at the expense of discretionary time that may not exist in the future.

5.2. How Contemporary Ideology Masks Real Labor-management Relationships

Contemporary ideology often obscures the real labor-management relationship, making it difficult for workers to recognize their own rights and status. In contemporary society, capitalist ideology generally promotes the concepts of individualism, competition, and success, emphasizing that individuals can achieve self-worth and social status through hard work and struggle. However, this ideology tends to conceal the inequality and exploitation that exists in labor-management relations.

Capitalist ideology emphasizes individual responsibility and autonomy, implying that each person's fate depends entirely on his or her own efforts and abilities. This conception inclines workers to see hardships and injustices at work as the result of their individual incapacity or lack of effort while ignoring the existence of structural problems and inequalities in labor relations. Workers tend to see themselves as competitors and ignore the importance of collective action and solidarity in labor-management relations. Competition and polarization among workers further weaken their collective bargaining power in industrial relations and make them more vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation by employers. It can be argued that the relationship between labor payments and payoffs has become increasingly complicated, and the sense of "autonomy of destiny" generated by workers has increasingly obscured the hidden power relations behind labor relations [9].

Capitalist ideology emphasizes economic efficiency and profit maximization, treating workers as one of the factors of production and ignoring their dignity and rights as human beings. This conception often prevents workers from realizing their own status and power in labor relations and makes them vulnerable to being forced to accept unfair working conditions and treatment.

To sum up, the influence of contemporary ideology on workers often obscures real labor-management relations, making it difficult for workers to recognize their own rights and status. To change this situation, it is necessary to strengthen workers' ideological education, enhance their knowledge and understanding of labor relations, and promote solidarity and collective action among workers to jointly safeguard their rights and dignity.

6. Conclusion

This paper explains how the labor consent of interns in the media industry is manufactured by treating interns as roles and making them voluntarily carry expectations in a seemingly rational way, endure hard work that has no educational value, and take on labor for no reason. The capitalist's vision of the future obscures the exploitation of the intern's present, and the capitalist's "ideal game" exchanges the labor consent of the "young digital laborer" generation. Interns consciously rationalize the phenomenon of "back-paying" internships, which makes it difficult for the intern community to fight and defend their rights.

Continuing Weber's analytical paradigm, sociologist George Ritzer has drawn on the concept of McDonaldization of society to distill four principles of rationalization [10]: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. The consent of interns in the media industry is also in line with the law of McDonaldization, where the seemingly rational process of creating consent has irrational consequences, and its pitfalls may even cancel out the original rationality of the process. The heart of McDonaldization is the pursuit of a rationalized process that is efficient and controllable while neglecting the cultivation of professional skills and the protection of workers' own rights and interests. Overemphasis on the quantity of labor experience leads to a neglect of quality, and quantitative rationality becomes a paradox of work experience. False labor consent created by the

"ideal game", in the imbalanced conditions of supply and demand, is manufactured among young people, who repeat de-skilled work and attempt to accumulate a number of internships in an attempt to secure a future of free time. The number of internships is an attempt to gain a guarantee of free time in the future.

Although this paper explains the labor consent of interns in the media industry, there are still problems such as insufficient survey examples, and internships, as a form of labor that exists in a wide range of industries, have not been given enough attention and protection, so more content related to the situation of young people is supposed to be seen in subsequent studies.

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