

Precarious Labor and Its Impact on LIS Workers and Institutions

Contingent, temporary, or contract labor, also sometimes referred to as precarious labor, has quickly become the norm for positions in libraries, archives, and other information and memory institutions over recent years. This shift from stable, full-time positions to positions that are short-term contract-based and often without benefits has drastically altered and undermined the professional library and information science (LIS) workforce. Using both critical theory and the grievance filed by UC-AFT on behalf of six temporary archivists at UCLA and its context as a case study, I examine how the mis- and overuse of contingent labor and its precarity negatively impact workers, institutions, and the libraries and archives fields as a whole.

The materiality of information work

The crisis of precarious labor in LIS is ongoing and fundamentally damaging to both workers and the LIS professions as a whole. Karl Marx's writings on communication, particularly in the *Grundrisse*, lay out how he considered it a form of work¹; this analysis is often overlooked by other theorists and critics of Marx, but it is crucial for how we approach a discussion of information work. Marx's analysis of communication of work, as well as Maurizio Lazzarato's work on immaterial labor (and his theory's shortcomings), are both valuable for assessing, theorizing, and developing solutions to precarious labor and its negative impacts in LIS both past and present.

Although Lazzarato's concept of immaterial labor is useful for discussing information work as it relates to cultural content creation and influence - Lazzarato defines the concept as

¹ Fuchs, Christian. *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*. New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014.

‘labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity’² - it can also serve to obscure the material basis of information work. The physical infrastructures and manufacturers that support information systems are very much material and inextricable from information work, even work that is many steps removed from the mining, shipping, and manufacturing processes that build the tools and networks for communication and information work.³

Even within LIS, using unpaid or temporary labor to do basic maintenance tasks can obscure the materiality of information work. As Karly Wildenhaus notes, “On this tendency for maintenance work to be jettisoned onto unpaid interns in archives, archivist Hillel Arnold refers to the ‘complicity [of archivists] in erasing others’ by ‘filling ongoing operational maintenance work with unpaid internships, or part-time and temporary labor.’”⁴ Higher-level information work is then left to the professionals in the field, and it not only gives the impression that their work has little materiality but also implies that the physical labor in LIS is of little to no value. There is also an important discussion to be had about how and to whom the term “professional” is applied in LIS, and how that impacts the discourse around both precarious and stable labor; I intend to address this as part of my PhD research and scholarly output.

Part of what allows for this obfuscation of labor through unpaid or precarious workers is the constant drive to innovate within capitalist society in general and LIS in particular. Marx and Engels write that “The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole

² Ibid.

³ Fuchs, 2014.

⁴ Wildenhaus, Karly. “Wages for Intern Work: Denormalizing Unpaid Positions in Archives and Libraries.” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 2, no. 1 (November 25, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v2i1.88>.

relations of society.”⁵ “Innovation” and “flexibility” become the watchwords in late capitalism that signal shifting labor and social relations. Workers are expected not only to themselves be innovative, but to accept “innovation” within the workplace without complaint. “Flexibility” in jobs is sold to workers as a positive feature, but far more frequently leads to the proliferation of temporary, part-time, and under-compensated labor.

The research currently happening on precarious labor, particularly by people like Wildenhaus and the *Collective Responsibility* project team, is invaluable at making clear the connections between changing production relations, “innovation,” “flexibility,” and neoliberal capitalism. Wildenhaus’ research illuminates the fact that although unpaid internships have generally been believed to be a necessary step to reaching secure employment in LIS, they in fact have the opposite effect of driving down wages and undermining full-time labor.⁶ The *Collective Responsibility* project’s survey results back up this assertion with hard data; from their survey of 100 current and former grant-funded digital LIS workers, 66% who were rehired at an institution after the completion of their initial temporary contract were simply rehired into another temporary position.⁷ Discussing the nature of temporary labor in LIS brings us back to the idea of immaterial labor and how, despite its drawbacks as a concept, it can still be useful for analyzing the current precarity situation.

Tiziana Terranova, in a discussion of technocapitalism, hits on a fundamental issue in a constantly-revolutionized sphere of production - the potentiality of immaterial labor within workers. “However, in the young worker, the ‘precarious worker,’ and the unemployed youth,

⁵ Marx, Karl, Friedrich Engels. “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” *Marx/Engels Selected Works, Vol. One*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969.

⁶ Wildenhaus, 2018.

⁷ Rodriguez, Sandy, Ruth Tillman, Amy Wickner, Stacie Williams, and Emily Drabinski. “Collective Responsibility: Seeking Equity for Contingent Labor in Libraries, Archives, and Museums.” Working Paper. University of Missouri -- Kansas City, 2019. <https://mospace.umsystem.edu/xmlui/handle/10355/69708>.

these capacities [for immaterial labor activities regarding cultural content] are ‘virtual,’ that is they are there but are still undetermined. ...postmodern governments do not like the completely unemployable. The potentialities of work must be kept alive, the unemployed must undergo continuous training in order both to be monitored and kept alive as some kind of postindustrial reserve force.”⁸ The key here is the emphasis on a “postindustrial reserve force” and the “potentialities of work.” Owners and managers are finding it more beneficial to themselves and their profit margin to not only subdivide labor processes, but to subdivide labor power as much as possible. Separating labor in both space and time in “pyramid subcontracting structures” allows for production and labor extraction mobility at the institutional level and at the worker level can present a management-friendly barrier to unionization and other labor collectivism.⁹

Structures and business models like the gig economy and Amazon’s Mechanical Turk - a website that allows businesses to essentially crowdsource minor computing or data work by paying freelancers to perform simple tasks like identifying image content that AI is unable to do - are a perfect example of the amount of profit that can be generated by the precariously- or semi-employed. This atomized work structure is prevalent in the modern university as well, instigated and supported by the rise of neoliberalism - as Kezar, DePaola and Scott note in their analysis of the “Gig Academy,” “work responsibilities are measured in tasks completed rather than time dedicated. This mode of accountability benefits the employer far more than the worker.”¹⁰ This unstable but highly profitable model has been infiltrating LIS for decades, helped along under the guise of innovation and flexibility.

⁸ Terranova, Tiziana. “Free Labor.” *Social Text* 18, no. 2 (2000): 33–58. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-18-2_63-33.

⁹ Rodriguez et al., 2019.

¹⁰ Kezar, Adrianna J., Thomas DePaola, and Daniel T. Scott. *The Gig Academy: Mapping Labor in the Neoliberal University*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019.

Temporary labor and the “UCLA Six”

In June of 2018, six archivists with temporary appointments in UCLA Library Special Collections (LSC) - Courtney Dean (Processing Archivist), Lori Dedeyan (Processing Archivist), M. Angel Diaz (Project Processing Archivist), Melissa Haley (Processing Archivist), Margaret Hughes (Collections Data Archivist) and Lauren McDaniel (Visual Materials Processing Archivist) - presented, along with the support of the librarians bargaining unit of UC-AFT, an open letter to the University Librarian and Associate University Librarian regarding the university’s misuse of temporary positions for ongoing - that is, non-project - work.¹¹ The letter lays out how the alleged misuse has taken place over the past decade, including past labor negotiations that were meant to mitigate it, and how that misuse negatively affects workers, collections, the library as a whole, and the university’s mission.

The main points against the mis- and overuse of contract archivist and librarian positions laid out in the letter are that “it wastes UCLA Library’s time and resources...it wastes Library Special Collections’ time and resources...it disrespects [LSC’s] donors, users, and collections, and subverts the mission of UCLA Library...it diminishes institutional knowledge...it inhibits long-term decision making...it hinders professional development...it is financially harmful...it damages archivists’ personal lives...[and] it undermines the professionalism, expertise, and worth of archivists.”¹² These assertions are important, and it behooves us and the LIS field as a whole to take them seriously. Some of these points are expanded upon below:

¹¹ Dean, Courtney, Lori Dedeyan, M. Angel Diaz, Melissa Haley, Margaret Hughes, and Lauren McDaniel. “UCLA Temporary Librarians,” June 11, 2018. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1h-P7mWiUn27b2nrkk-1eMbDkqSZtk4Moxis07KcMwhI/edit>.

¹² Ibid.

Wasting time and resources: Temporary positions, whether grant-funded or short-term contract-based, necessitate frequent hiring cycles, which require staff time and other resources (including financial) to recruit, interview, and onboard new hires. If a position is grant-funded, the “timeline between when a grant is awarded and when it begins can be brief. As a result, hiring timelines may seem rushed or follow different processes than full-time, permanent positions doing similar work.”¹³

Disrespectful of donors, users, and collections; subverts institutional mission: When temporary employees are doing non-project work, the likelihood of that work continuing uninterrupted once their contract is up is very slim. This lack of continuity is damaging to the cataloging and maintenance of collections and thus damaging to donor relations and user needs. If donors, users, and collections themselves are not being properly served, maintained, utilized, and made accessible through the use of contract labor, then using contract labor is not a sufficient or acceptable use of university resources.

Diminishment of institutional knowledge: As mentioned above, disruptions in long-term work due to contingent workers’ contracts expiring is a major cause of institutional knowledge being lost. Temporary workers doing non-project work may not have the time or resources to fully document their work, and so when their grant or contract term is up, their acquired knowledge of the collections, donors, and users leave the institution with them.¹⁴

Inhibits long-term decision-making: This applies not only to institutions but also temporary workers’ personal lives. For institutions, relying on contract and other forms of temporary labor may seem financially preferable, but in the long term can in fact be more costly in terms of projects not fully realized (“When grants end, the accomplished work can lie dormant

¹³ Rodriguez et al., 2019.

¹⁴ Ibid.

without anyone to promote it,” as Rodriguez et al. note¹⁵), gaps in valuable institutional knowledge, and reinforcing institutional reliance on grant-funded or temporary work as budgets get slashed even further without those in positions of power advocating for full-time worker funding. Many contingent workers, despite the reassurances of not just employers but even other LIS workers that temporary labor is not the norm and is in fact merely a stepping stone to permanent work¹⁶, find themselves forced into a cycle of short-term employment. This dependence on contract after contract impedes a worker’s ability to plan for long-term life goals or changes such as professional development, moving, health concerns, savings, family, and more. Being stripped of the ability to plan long term can feel dehumanizing and can negatively impact workers’ financial situations, health, and personal lives.

Undermines the professionalism, expertise, and worth of LIS workers: This is perhaps one of the most wide-reaching and long-term negative impacts of precarious labor in LIS. The discourse around “paying one’s dues” through undercompensated and/or temporary entry-level positions, or just simply the reluctance among later-career LIS workers or those with hiring power to push back against a widespread practice, has led to a severe devaluation in the labor of LIS workers. This devaluation can cause graduate students entering the workforce, early-career LIS workers, and even experienced LIS workers to question their worth as employees, and may pressure them into accepting positions that are under-compensated, without benefits, or lacking stability. The *Collective Responsibility* project’s survey results, as mentioned above, have shown in hard numbers that taking temporary positions more often than not simply leads to another temporary position, rather than a permanent job.¹⁷ LIS workers possess many specialized skills,

¹⁵ Rodriguez et al., 2019.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Rodriguez et al., 2019.

and treating them as expendable not only dehumanizes and devalues them as individuals but lends further justification to the slashing of library budgets, mistreatment and undercompensation of employees, and the idea of professional LIS work as “unskilled” or disposable.

UC-AFT and UCLA are still going through the grievance process at this time; meanwhile, the livelihood of temporary archivists and librarians is more precarious than ever during the COVID-19 crisis. It is dangerous and unconscionable for LIS institutions to hire contract employees without healthcare benefits during a global pandemic, and this situation is an even more forceful example of how damaging precarious positions can be, not just for workers but for institutions and for patrons. A quarantine puts temporary workers in an even more precarious position than usual - many have simply had their contracts cancelled, and others get paid hourly and thus lose crucial income. No matter how many “be safe out there!” emails are sent and hand sanitizer bottles are available in the office, having even a portion of your workforce unable to see a doctor is unsafe and unsustainable. With healthcare both tied to one’s job and increasingly unaffordable even for those with insurance, LIS institutions in the United States are putting their workers and their users at great risk during an epidemic.

Future research

Moving forward, it is essential to examine this precarity crisis in LIS in much greater depth. Further exploration of subjects like the contested uses of “professional,” what is meant by “continuous training” (as referenced by Terranova above¹⁸) and how that both applies to LIS workers and is upheld through practices like work skills-related public library programming, and other similar topics can provide more useful scholarship and discourse around the relationship

¹⁸ Terranova, 2000.

between LIS and labor. Though beyond the scope of this piece, it would also be valuable to examine some important relationships: the invisibility of archival labor and that labor being undervalued; neoliberalism and its connection to the concepts of “flexibility” and “innovation,” particularly in LIS; and the question of immaterial labor and social reproduction in libraries and other public-facing LIS spaces.

There’s already excellent work being done within MLIS programs and professional organizations to conduct research, and continuing this work both at the theoretical level and as praxis is sorely needed. Professional organizations should be conducting regular censuses of their members and their employment situations. MLIS programs can encourage their students as well as their faculty to engage with this type of research. Although project and grant-funded work has its place in LIS, the overdependence upon and misuse of this type of labor is a professional crisis in the field. Advocating and agitating for fair labor practices in LIS requires research, assessment, and education, and the discourse around precarious labor is finally becoming more fruitful and widespread.