Paradoxically, the media both promotes and obscures the value of humanities labor.

In studying our Collection 1 (82,324 articles from U.S. journalistic media mentioning “humanities”), we observed in our key finding KF-4-9 that the media promotes a view that humanities work leads to valued employment and financial outcomes (see KF 4-9). Paradoxically, however, this speculative narrative represents humanities labor as both visible and invisible. For example, we see in a topic model of the collection (C-14.250, 250-topics) that the articles highly associated with topics 2, 25, and 73 foreground humanistic activities--such as critical thinking, creative writing, and community building--as necessary work that will ensure quantifiable results like enrollment, income, or jobs in the future. These narratives, at the same time, conceal the fact that these activities are intangible, uncompensated, and perhaps unfinishable forms of surplus labor.

In topics where we find this paradox, top-frequency words tend to group economic and business-related terms with those that are (ostensibly) non-economic. For example, topic 73’s top words include community, support, work, new, development, education, and leadership. The relative weights of these words demonstrate that the frequency of community eclipses that of work. This difference suggests that the articles associated with topic 73 spend more time describing non-economic ideas of community and less time discussing how such humanities work actually proceeds. This is confirmed through close readings of top articles. In addition, the headlines of top articles, such as “Dickinson Receives $900,000 Grant...” and “Associated Colleges...awarded $2.7 million grant...” (see images) prioritize money and make the exact nature of humanities labor invisible.

Understanding how the public as represented in the media values the humanities, WE1S suggests, requires attending to the media’s paradoxical representation of this labor. How can humanists regain narrative control over their own in/visibility and surface the value of their own labor without rehearsing the media’s rhetoric of economic value as surplus labor extraction?