

# Prisoners and the Press

**Yvonne Jewkes** describes how most press coverage of prisoners merely serves to inflame the readers' moral outrage and confirm their prejudices.

**W**hile movies about confinement have achieved commercial and critical success, and TV shows such as *Porridge* and *Bad Girls* have exploited the prison's comic and dramatic potential in equal measure, prisoners have, by contrast, been portrayed with a lazy contempt by newspaper journalists who assume – probably correctly – that large segments of their readership regard prisoners as society's detritus (Jewkes, 2005). Newspaper readers tend to read a particular title only if they already subscribe to its worldview and, to put it crudely, readers of any of the tabloid or mid-market newspapers and the conservative broadsheets (in other words, the majority of readers) may look to their choice of newspaper to confirm what they already 'know', which is that prisons are full of dangerous individuals living the life of Riley. To this extent, it is a mistake to believe that news reporters even strive for accuracy. Newspapers are not engaged in dispassionate analysis but precisely the opposite – passionate engagement for the purposes of exercising moral sentiment. When people read news reports about prisons and prisoners, they are looking for both

death of Myra Hindley in 2002 and the release of his former partner Maxine Carr in 2004, has become Britain's most newsworthy inmate. Many stories concerning Huntley are vehicles for the press to censure the Prison Service (e.g. when staff at Woodhill Prison failed to spot that an undercover *News of the World* journalist had gained a job as a prison officer and taken photographs of Huntley and his cell in April 2004). But Huntley also carries the dubious distinction of being a 'filler' for the tabloids on quiet news days and a stock narrative concerns the friendships he's formed in prison with other tabloid folk devils (e.g. 'Baby Killer makes friends with Ian Huntley', *News & Star*, 3rd November 2004; and 'Huntley's new pal is serial slayer suspect', *People*, November 7th 2004).

The second theme framing press coverage of prisons is that of pampered prisoners. Stories which characterize prisons as 'holiday camps' in which inmates enjoy advantages they do not 'deserve' fuel the tabloid media's view of a criminal justice system which is soft on crime. As I have argued elsewhere, privileges such as in-cell TV are rarely straightforward perks, but are part of a tightly-controlled incentives scheme designed

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confirmation of their existing views – which tend to be punitive – and for further opportunity to be shocked and outraged (Katz, 1987). On the whole, then, the grim and frequently inhumane conditions of incarceration only reach public attention if accompanied by a soundbite by Her Majesty's Inspector of Prisons in language that will appeal to the popular media. There are exceptions, of course. The *Guardian* deserves praise for bringing numerous 'unpopular' prison issues to the attention of its readers; among them overcrowding, racism among inmates and prison staff, drug addiction, mental illness and suicide ([www.guardian.co.uk/prisons](http://www.guardian.co.uk/prisons)). But in most newspapers, coverage of these issues is sparse and, on the whole, press reporting about prisoners and prisons tends to fall into one or more of five thematic groups.

### **Five 'types' of prisoner**

The five-fold typology within which prisoners are constructed by the press consists of: celebrity prisoners, pampered prisoners, sexual relations in prison, lax security, and abuses or assaults on inmates. The most salient of these themes, especially in the popular press, is that of 'celebrity' which is usually predicated on the offence(s) for which the prisoner was sentenced. In accordance with the news values that shape the selection and construction of stories generally, individuals whose crimes meet a certain threshold of horror, or whose offences are explained by reference to their sexuality or sexual deviance, and involve multiple victims and/or child victims, frequently achieve a macabre kind of celebrity (Jewkes, 2004). Of particular note in this regard is Ian Huntley who, since the

to ensure good behaviour, and are at least as beneficial to the regime and the authorities as they are to individual inmates (Jewkes, 2002). But prison officials have less control over inmates when they are beyond the confines of the prison, and when Iorworth Hoare won the lottery with a ticket bought while he was on weekend leave from HMP Leyhill, the press fell over themselves to pour scorn on the Prison Service, the Government and lottery operators Camelot, for allowing 'vermin' (*Sun*, August 11th 2004) and 'low-life scum bags' (*Daily Star*, August 12th 2004) to gamble while serving a prison sentence. Meanwhile, returning to a favourite figure of hate, the *Sunday Mirror* writes:

"MAXINE Carr enjoyed an extraordinary festive knees-up behind bars... During a day of astonishing antics Carr: -RELISHED her role as prison celebrity, teasing warders and basking in the attention of fellow inmates -TOLD jokes and took part in party games including pictionary and bingo.

-ENJOYED a hearty meal, including turkey and Christmas pudding.

-BOASTED about how much she was looking forward to her 'new life' once she's freed.

Her festive joy was in sharp contrast to the devastated lives of the families of Huntley's 10-year-old victims, Jessica Chapman and Holly Wells. While they could only reflect on their terrible loss, Carr was letting her hair down."

(*Sunday Mirror*, December 28th 2003)



*Big Issue founder John Bird demonstrates the SmartJustice Revolving Door*

A third theme is that of sexual relations in prisons. Interestingly, consenting sex among male prisoners remains a taboo subject for the media, yet sex among women prisoners is the subject of much speculation and scrutiny. Evidence of, or allusions to, lesbian relations between inmates are overwhelmingly presented as ‘proof’ of their guilt and as justification for their demonization at the hands of the press (Jewkes, 2004). Most infamous in this respect were the photographs published in 1995 showing Myra Hindley and Rose West holding hands in the high-security wing of Durham Prison, but ‘inappropriate relationships’ is a pervasive – if tenuous – theme in a great many news reports about women in prison. For example, the account of Maxine Carr’s Christmas in Holloway goes on to report that “she greeted warders by hugging them” and “ran her hands through their hair – shocking fellow prisoners.” One reported: “She is really touchy-feely. Maxine caresses their hair – it’s quite horrid” (*Sunday Mirror*, December 28th 2003). Another highly newsworthy story – and one that further indicates the low status afforded women in the patriarchal popular press – is that of the prison officer who forms a sexual relationship with an inmate. Such stories regularly involve two women, but a variation on the same theme is the story of the naïve female officer who allows herself to be duped into having an affair with a calculating and controlling male inmate.

While the three categories mentioned so far are easily dismissed as a trivialization of prison issues, the final two themes that determine and structure news stories about prisoners cannot be regarded as mere media froth, although they are subjects that may be graphically sensationalized. The fourth is security – or to be more precise, lack of security. Given the relative infrequency of prison riots, reports about lax security usually take one of two forms: either prisoner escapes, or

suicides and attempted suicides:

**“Dead shooting suspect was taken off suicide watch.**

The man accused of shooting dead his estranged wife and her sister at a family barbecue killed himself in prison three days after being taken off suicide watch, it was revealed today...The 39-year-old had dismantled a disposable razor and cut himself repeatedly with the blade while in his single cell.” (*Guardian* June 21st 2004)

**“Outrage after drug smuggler flees prison.** One of Scotland’s most notorious drug smugglers has escaped from an open prison after serving just six years of a 21-year sentence. Roderick McLean, the king-pin behind a plot to smuggle £10 million of cannabis into the country, was originally classified as a dangerous Category A prisoner at Saughton jail in Edinburgh. But he was subsequently moved to an open prison in England that does not even have a perimeter fence. It has now emerged that McLean walked out of the prison two months ago and has not been seen since.”

(*Scotsman* 29th December 2003)

Once more, an acquaintance with the processes of news production helps us understand why most escapes and deaths in custody are not considered newsworthy. Suicides and attempted suicides usually only reach the pages of the press if the story conforms to several cardinal news values, e.g. it concerns a particularly notorious (‘celebrity’) inmate, thus meeting the required ‘threshold’ for inclusion, and is reduced (‘simplified’) to an event that was both ‘predictable’ and therefore preventable. The suicides of Fred West, Harold Shipman, and the attempted

*Continued on page 29*

(2002). In this way, the conflicting ideologies of both imprisonment and TV viewing meet head on and TV is seen as either:

- A significant luxury, a highly valued commodity. Time spent viewing is an extravagance, which could be better spent doing something more productive or prudent. Time allocated to TV viewing should be for the deserving rather than the undeserving.
- A corruptive medium which makes audiences passive, idle, sedated, the 'plug-in drug' leading to moral and social deviance. Based on this premise viewing should be regulated, supervised and controlled, especially for groups that are deemed to not be responsible in their viewing choices, such as children.

These attitudes have affected the management of access to TV in prisons, and public resentment to prisoners having access to TV is reflected in the practice of the prison regime. There are however conflicting perceptions and interests in relation to the role of TV viewing in person. On the one hand, TV and prison can both, in a somewhat distorted view, be perceived as forms of social control, as the experience of imprisonment and viewing TV can render humans docile and idle. Yet, allowing prisoners to watch TV is not readily accepted and it appears that the discourse of resentment emerges from the notion that prisoners should not be distracted by TV and that their time should be spent in contemplation of their crime. On the other hand, the advantages of TV viewing in prison in terms of helping prisoners to cope with and manage their time certainly exceed the disadvantages. There is however a danger that the predominant discourse on imprisonment, and the service, could stifle and limit prisoners' legitimate need to access TV.

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*Continued from page 27*

suicide of Ian Huntley are all notable examples. The more general trend, however, is for prison suicides to go unreported, and few newspaper readers may be aware that there were 95 self-inflicted deaths in prisons in 2004, including 13 women. The suicide in that year of a 14-year-old – believed to be the youngest person to die in British custody – is not included in official figures because he died at a privately run secure training unit (*www.howardleague.org/press*). Similarly, escapes generally only feature in the national press if the inmate concerned is well-known or is especially dangerous. They are more likely to be reported in the local press (i.e. newspapers proximate to the location of the prison from which the prisoner absconded), but, again, only if the escapee represents a danger to the public or if the story constitutes a 'filler'. In any case, the press relies on contacts within the police or Prison Service to feed them information about security lapses, which may not be forthcoming. In relation to the Scottish incident, prison reform campaigner Mark Leech reports that, when he questioned the service's Director General about why the public were not advised that a dangerous prisoner was at large, he was told, 'We have a duty to keep in custody those committed by the courts but we do not have a duty to inform the media of every escape' (*www.PrisonToday.com*).

The final theme underpinning reports of prisons is the abuses and assaults inflicted on prisoners by staff or by other inmates. Of all the themes, this is the least salient, and generally stories about victimization in prisons will be reported only when an official inquiry has taken place. Like crime news more generally, the appearance of a story about an assault in prison is dependent upon editorial judgements being made about the victim, with some victims being considered more worthy than others (Jewkes, 2004). And, again, in common with wider media constructions, a story will always be more newsworthy if the victim's relatives make themselves part of the story (ibid). But, aside from a few notable examples where a family campaigns tirelessly to keep a case in the public eye (as have relatives of Zahid Murabek, murdered by his racist cell-mate at Feltham Young Offenders Institution in March 2002), most assaults and abuses remain hidden behind prison walls (Jewkes, 2005). Like previous examples, the exception to this invisibility is attacks on notorious or 'celebrity' inmates, which tend to be widely reported (e.g. the stabbing of Peter Sutcliffe in the eye by fellow Broadmoor inmate, Ian Kay, in March 1997). That assaults on inmates are sometimes tolerated by those with the authority to intervene, and are then regarded as suitable fodder for the popular press, is a depressing indictment on societal attitudes towards prison inmates but, like the five-fold typology outlined in this article, such attitudes serve to further stigmatize a population which is already at the margins, and which rarely has a right of reply.

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