

Remote Control: the role of TV in prison

Victoria Knight considers the different roles TV viewing plays in prisons, and points to the dangers of using TV access as another means of control.

The experience of being a 'prisoner' is well documented, as are experiences of watching TV, and there is a small amount of research on prisoners' experiences as TV audiences (Vandebosch 2001, Knight 2001 and Jewkes 2002). While there have been some negative comments in the press about prisoners' access to TV, research indicates a complex situation. The introduction of in-cell TV to prisons from 1995 onwards has, for example, contributed to the control and regulation of behaviour, thus benefiting the regime and becoming a significant instrument of punishment.

Prisoners watching TV

Watching TV is the most popular activity in Britain today. Our everyday lives, especially in our domestic spheres, have become 'saturated' (O'Sullivan *et al* 1998) by mass communications, especially TV, which on average we spend 29 hours each week watching (BARB, 2005). The process of imprisonment however, removes or suspends the normal freedoms in relation to viewing TV. Despite popular conceptions, prisoners' access to television in prison is neither automatic nor constant. The Incentive and Earned Privilege (IEP) system determines prisoners' levels of access to TV, based on maintaining and sustaining good behaviour and conduct. Consequently access to TV is constantly negotiated between prisoners and staff. Accounts of watching television in prison reveal how this restriction of access to a TV in the first instance creates stress or an additional 'pain of imprisonment' (Sykes 1958).

In general, watching TV allows prisoners:

- To remain connected to a world they are severed from and feel that they are simultaneously sharing a televisual experience with other people, such as family and friends.
- To remain informed and part of public debate, thus maintaining some sense of citizenship.
- To feel close to others, less isolated and less bored.
- To 'talk' about things outside the prison routine.
- To pass and fill time, which is often experienced as long and empty.
- To make choices and remain actively in control of what they want to watch, thus providing some autonomy.
- To carve out some privacy in an otherwise very public domain.

Not all prisoners (or audiences) use TV in the same way. Accounts from prisoners indicate a significant recognition that TV viewing in prison provides some diversion from the long periods of boredom. The act of viewing TV 'fills' blocks of time that otherwise are often described as 'empty' (Cope 2003). There is, however, a paradox. Viewing TV can create and accentuate feelings of boredom, brought about by features such as news updates and the length of programmes. This is because

TV can mark time at a slower pace than other activities such as *interacting with other people or writing a letter*. For some, television is a remedy to quash and divert periods of boredom, whereas others find prolonged experiences of watching TV futile and an additional 'pain' of their experience of incarceration.

Remote control

It is well documented that the prison regime has always sought to control and restrict forms of communication and that enforced isolation and loneliness is a major experience of imprisonment (Forsythe, 2004). Today the IEP system formalises, facilitates and orchestrates access to communications, including TV, and is an underlying mechanism for controlling prisoners. The role that TV (particularly in-cell TV) has in the administration of the regime is that it:

- Serves as a reward for desirable behaviour and conduct, but its withdrawal equally serves as a punishment for inappropriate behaviour; It thus becomes a tool for social control.
- Symbolically defines prisoners by their behaviour status. Prisoners with in-cell television are observed as compliant and those without as disobedient.
- Occupies prisoners whilst locked up in their cells, acting as a 'baby-sitter'. TV is a cheap and low maintenance resource which can be perceived as an instrument for relinquishing staffing costs from more resource demanding activities, such as work or education.
- Keeps prisoners more sedate and passive, which aids smoother prisoner management. Occupying prisoners in the guise of television viewing helps to maintain a less volatile atmosphere and thus reduce incidents of bullying, conflict and violence against others and themselves.
- Is a resource which helps to manage aspects of overcrowding and movement around prison premises. Whilst occupied in TV viewing in their cells, prisoners could be less inclined to leave their cells, thus relieving the service of demands on the duty of care.

Thus, while the prison regime holds TV up as a 'luxury' and stresses many of the positive purposes attributed to TV, controlling the access to and use of TV serves as a form of prisoner management.

Discourse on TV in prisons

Those public perceptions which have been recorded indicate that the public reaction to prisoners' access to TV is positioned alongside punitive attitudes about the role of imprisonment rather than recognising the potential rehabilitative role of TV as discussed by Vandebosch (2001), Knight (2001) and Jewkes

(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 prison. 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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