

The media and reform: the case of *Banged Up*

David Wilson discusses the reform potential of popular media, focusing on the TV series *Banged Up*.

In my previous writing I have suggested that popular, mainstream TV and films about prisons can serve a penal reform function through, for example, helping to set standards of decency for what is and what is not acceptable practice in prison, and representing prisoners as people in an attempt to counter processes of depersonalisation and dehumanisation (Wilson and O'Sullivan, 2005). Indeed since first making this argument in 2005, other criminologists have also begun to argue that 'public criminology' should be taken seriously and that 'the texts, audiences and industries involved in producing popular criminology ought to become targets for academic research' (Carrabine, 2008).

These dual arguments provide a context for this article which is concerned with the reality TV series *Banged Up*, which was made by the independent production company Shine North and was shown on Channel 5 in the United Kingdom between 7-28 July 2008. In brief, the series saw the disused prison in Scarborough re-converted into a functioning jail – with suitably qualified prison personnel in attendance – and into which ten young men aged between 16 and 17, all of whom had offended (one or two persistently) were received as 'prisoners'. Later, adult, former prisoners – who had been trained as mentors – were introduced into the jail as cellmates for the young prisoners. A specific device of having the young prisoners attend a 'parole board' hearing was introduced by the TV production company, as a means of both telling the young

prisoner's story and measuring their progress within the series. The Rt Hon David Blunkett MP, the former Home Secretary (2001-2004) was recruited to chair the parole board hearings. Throughout the programme makers not only wanted to entertain viewers with this piece of 'reality TV', but also have the young prisoners experience what prison was like in the belief that this could change their future behaviour. In short, the programme was seen as performing a penal reform function.

As someone involved with the making of *Banged Up* – I advised the production company and appeared in front of camera as the prison's 'Governor' – I concentrate here simply on reaction to the series by way of newspaper reviews and discuss viewing figures – the 'audience'- although it should also be noted that some measure of the series' critical success can be gleaned from the fact that it was nominated for an RTS Award in the 'Best Documentary' category for 2008. A more detailed account of the series and the issues that it raises is in preparation with Dr Nic Groombridge.

'David Blunkett's *Banged Up* is a sham'

The quote above was the blogged response of Erwin James, *Guardian* correspondent and ex-prisoner, and represents some of the more negative views on the series. Other more positive and occasionally tangential comments are presented below as a way of understanding how *Banged Up* may have positively contributed to public criminology through 'benchmarking' what is acceptable and unacceptable practice in prison,

and by humanising both the young offenders and their adult mentors.

Using LexisNexis, a search was made of UK newspapers on 14 August 2008 for the term 'banged up' in the previous three months. This yielded 42 stories over 24 newspapers in which the programme was mentioned. This mention might have been as brief as the programme being cited as evidence of Channel 5's commitment to new programmes to over 2,000 words of interview with David Blunkett.

As might be expected the majority of mentions were in TV previews (20) and reviews (8) and clearly the majority of other articles/profiles had been sparked by the series or publicity for it. The setting of Scarborough's former jail ensured some coverage by local papers (four mentions in *Scarborough Evening News*) as did the participation of ex-offenders (*Birmingham Evening News*), offenders (*Liverpool Daily Echo*) and prison officers (*Western Mail*) from around the country but it was the use of the former Home Secretary, David Blunkett, as the figurehead that created both coverage and criticism, as about half appeared to concentrate on him.

The Guardian led with eight mentions (plus one in *The Observer*) with six different writers filing previews, reviews and a long profile. There was not a 'party line' on this and thus Gareth McLean (7 August 2008) concentrated on Blunkett and was scathing on the lack of reality: 'without the random acts of violence, rape in the showers and being surrounded by people with mental illness. So nothing like prison, then'. On the other hand Andrew Mueller twice made it his 'pick of the day' (19 and 26 July 2008) remarking, 'it's astounding that, despite the uncountable permutations of reality television we've endured, nobody has done this before', 'dazzlingly simple, and arguably meaningful' and 'The drama is compelling, the insight into prison life fascinating'.

On the other hand Stuart Jeffries reviewing the series remarked, 'Like Big Brother, this had sociological justification lost in the mists of production meetings and probably similarly disappointing viewing

figures'. So we have a 'Marmite' product – people either loved it or loathed it.

Much was made of the Blunkett connection. Andrea Mullaney writing in the *Scotsman* (29 July 2008) spoke of an 'experiment in rehabilitating David Blunkett as a TV personality' and Alice Thomson in *The Times* (7 July 2008) allows Blunkett to insist, 'he was not playing the role of Davina McCall. This was no Big Brother. It wasn't even The Apprentice. We didn't seek to humiliate anyone'. The *Western Mail* (14 July 2008) was more positive, claiming, 'unquestionably this summer's toughest reality show, and what's more, it serves a very serious purpose – which is probably why it's presented by a former Home Secretary'.

In addition to lengthy pieces in *The Guardian* (7 August 2008), *Daily Telegraph* (5 July 2008), *The Times* (7 and 8 August 2008) focusing on Blunkett, the *New Statesman* (17 July 2008) allowed him 1,400 words to justify himself and the programme. In this he set out much of the material mentioned above, name checked those involved and praised the ex-offender mentor Bob Croxton and the young offender that Bob helped and another who was to join the army. These mentions are by first name but some local papers did not give that level of anonymity. On 15 July 2008, *Liverpool Daily Echo* focused on local 'DC' who, 'who has gone from layabout to full time office worker since taking part in the programme' whose mother, 'was starting to lose hope for her son, who always seemed angry and barely spoke to her'.

Audiences

Barb figures for the week ending 13 July show that *Banged Up* had 0.99 million viewers and was ranked 28th for the channel; first was *Neighbours* with 1.73m. The numbers had dropped slightly for week 2 at 0.96 million viewers but was 25th rank

and suffered a slight further decline for week 3 to 0.87m viewers and 29th rank and, regrettably had dropped out of the top 30 in its final

week in which *Myra Hindley: The Prison Years* was ranked 16th with 1.07m. For comparison, BBC1's 30th ranked programme that week, 6 *O'clock News*, attracted 3.59m; BBC2's *Eggheads* 1.36m; ITV's *Trinny and Susannah Undress the Nation* 2.93m and Channel 4's *Richard and Judy* 1.08m. Whilst Channel 5 cannot boast the public service pretensions of the BBC or Channel 4 its schedulers/audience has a taste for crime dramas and documentaries so the use of a reality format is particularly appropriate and will have reached more people than read this journal.

In his discussion with Aitkenhead (*Guardian*, 7 July 2008) David Blunkett explained:

We spent a lot of time making these four one-hour episodes, actually looking at the problem and being able to talk it through. You don't get that space to be able to articulate it when you're in government. You just don't.

Elsewhere he mentions the difficulties of being Home Secretary and of funding 'experimental programmes'. Here he is referring to 'scared straight' and restorative justice or community interventions, and one of the most dramatic scenes within the series related to a restorative justice initiative with two of the young offenders. In his autobiography Blunkett complains of the 'hand-wringing' at liberal dinner parties when enthusing about a community justice initiative he wanted to import from Brooklyn (Blunkett, 2006). Released from the shackles of office he could step back and consider other options. It is a shame that the late modern condition should render reality TV such power but it has to be recognised that the shortage of Habermasian civic spaces for communication mean that criminologists, penal reformers and politicians alike may have to sup with this particular devil.

Even so there are dangers and James Rampton – writing in the *Daily Telegraph* (5 July 2008) – observed: 'It's a serious social experiment.

Parents, schools or youth offending teams might record these programmes and use them as a tool'. And whilst hopeful about the outcomes for offenders, ex-offenders and 'officers' alike we would stop short of Stephen Piles' suggestion – also in the *Telegraph* (12 July 2008) – that, 'If all of them change their ways, the criminal justice system must be handed over to Channel 5 immediately'.

Without seeking to equate *Banged Up* with the experiences of John Tulloch, Professor of Sociology at Brunel University blown up in the 7/7 attack at Edgware Station, who writing in this journal after his blood-spattered face became an iconic picture of that day, and despite the fact that his image was used by the *Sun*, without his consent, to support Blair's call for 90 days detention without charge, argued:

There is room for much more 'public intellectual' engagement in the media than we might think. For academics, I believe there is no more important activity in the face of the growth of the criminal justice state.
(Tulloch, 2008)

Through benchmarking what should happen in our jails with those young people who are imprisoned there and by humanising them and their adult mentors, the cause of public criminology and penal reform was well-served by *Banged Up*. ■

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References

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