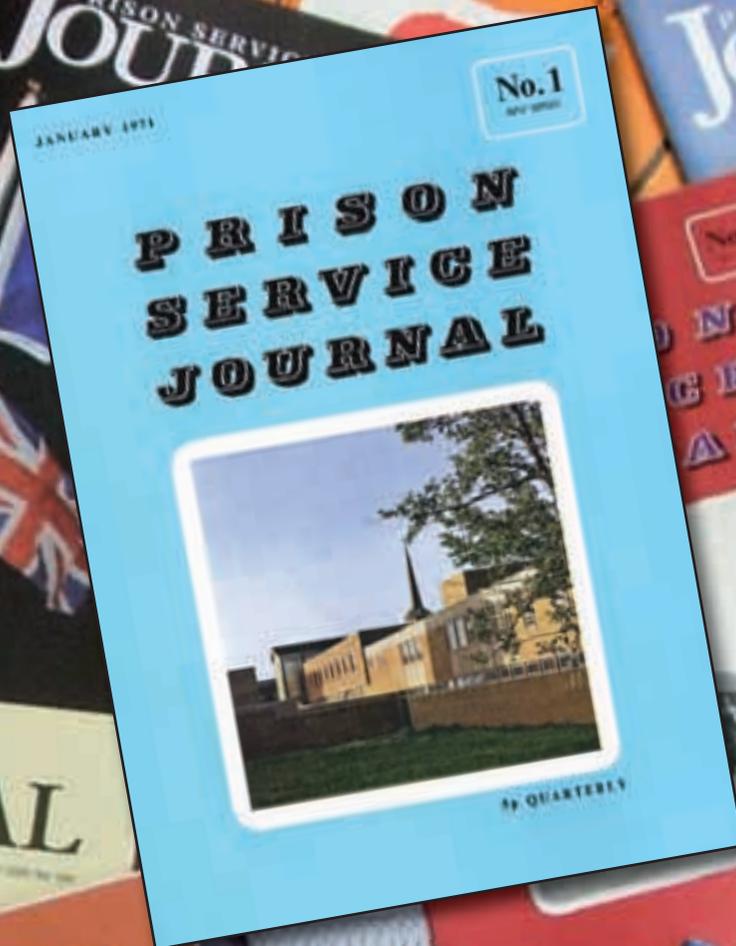


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# Reflections on 'The Media and the Message'

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## A black-and-white world

**In many ways this is a curious little piece. While it draws on a fairly eclectic bunch of media outputs — the BBC's popular *Man Alive* documentary series, *Late Night Line-up*, the *Sunday Times* and *New Society* — it is the television broadcasts mentioned in the article that most dramatically underline how parochial, authoritarian and small the media landscape was in the early 1970s. Written at a time when there were just three television channels — BBC1, BBC2 and ITV — Alan Rayfield might justifiably have assumed that most people who were sufficiently interested to read an article in *Prison Service Journal* on 'The Media and the Message' would actually have watched the TV programmes he is writing about; an assumption that could not be made in today's 24-hour, timeshifting, technologically advanced, commercially driven, global and fragmented media marketplace. But back in 1971, despite many people watching in black and white (it would be another four years until colour TVs outnumbered monochrome sets in Britain), audience share regularly nudged 20 million — a figure now reserved for royal weddings and the *X Factor* final. Furthermore, in those pre-VCR (video cassette recorder) years, many of the programmes mentioned in the *PSJ* article might have been regarded by the author as literally 'unmissable'. At a distance of forty years, however, Rayfield's commentary is frustratingly short on detail.**

The similarities between then and now are nonetheless apparent. Summer is still the 'silly season' and, while the Loch Ness monster may make fewer appearances than in former years, the weather, traffic and sport are still staples of the summer TV schedules and newspaper pages. But then, as now, there were events of significant and enduring political and social importance that punctuated the months between Wimbledon fortnight and the *Morecambe and Wise Christmas Special*. Rayfield makes only brief reference to the story unfolding in Northern Ireland; his article

was published in *PSJ* the month before the first British soldier to die in the Troubles was shot by the IRA on New Lodge Road, Belfast, and exactly one year before 27 unarmed civilians were shot by the British Army during a civil rights march in Derry in a massacre that became known as Bloody Sunday. Amid the escalating violence in 1971, British Prime Minister Edward Heath faced criticism, just as leaders still do today, for leaving London in times of crisis. Specifically, Heath came under fire for his participation in the Admiral's Cup on board his yacht *Morning Cloud*. An article in the August 1971 American magazine *Sports Illustrated* (a publication that was probably not among Alan Rayfield's media subscriptions) described the problem facing Heath:

*All the way out from Cowes, on the Isle of Wight, to the forlorn pile of the Fastnet Rock off the southwestern extremity of Ireland, the highly sophisticated radio equipment aboard Morning Cloud had fed into her austere cabin a kind of information no racing yacht before her had ever received. On the return to Plymouth, the messages coming through from London were more frequent, their substance more momentarily gloomy. Time and again Mr Edward Heath was obliged to detach himself from the problems besetting his 30-foot sloop and forget that he was captain of the British team that was on its way to defeating Australia and the US in the Admiral's Cup. He was forced to assume his working identity as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and as he absorbed more and more detail of the murderous violence in Ulster, to admit that the very title of that kingdom had yet again emerged as one of the sadder jokes of the 20th century'.*

The *Sports Illustrated* article goes on to detail the events of summer 1971 when 1,000 extra British troops were deployed to Ulster to round up and intern hundreds of individuals believed to be involved in

1. McIlvanney, H. (1971) 'Steering the ship of state', *Sports Illustrated* 23 August 1971: p. 48.

terrorist activities. As the article's writer Hugh McIlvanney notes, this 'tightly coordinated dragnet was coordinated for a time when *Morning Cloud* would be far out in the Atlantic'<sup>2</sup>, a move defended by the government who argued that it was imperative that the PM was on board so that suspects in Ulster would not guess something was up and go into hiding. Twelve people died violently in Ulster on the first day of the emergency internment measures, prompting the *Daily Mail* (10 Aug 1971) to demand that a helicopter airlift Heath from the deck of the *Morning Cloud* to Downing Street. Ironically juxtaposing the Prime Minister's progress in the yacht race with events unfolding in Northern Ireland, the *Mail* commented 'hundreds of homes in Belfast burnt out. A Roman Catholic priest shot dead while administering the last rites. And *Morning Cloud* was lying sixth on corrected time. When will someone start to correct the times in Northern Ireland?'<sup>3</sup>

### Counter arguments and dissenting voices

Despite the heavy condemnation that Heath endured for 'adopting his sporting persona at a time when political demands on his energies remained undiminished by the imminence of the Parliament's summer recess'<sup>4</sup> he was prompted to return to London only once for a meeting with Bernard Faulkner, Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, and he was back at the helm of his yacht to steer it to victory in the Admiral's Cup. In the current era of populism in all law-and-order issues, the Prime Minister may have to interrupt his leisure time more frequently to come home and address the nation (in the riot-hit summer of 2011 David Cameron returned from his vacation no less than five times) but Stuart Hall's comment, quoted by Rayfield, that acts of public disorder are presented by politicians and the media as a 'meaningless explosion of meaningless and violent acts' is arguably as true today as it was in 1971.

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no longer possible to talk about the 'mass media', and one can find more dissenting voices even within mainstream channels and news titles. For example, several editorials in newspapers such as the *Independent* and the *Guardian* took issue with the framing of violence in August 2011 as 'mindless', arguing, for example that looting was 'fuelled by social exclusion'<sup>5</sup> and resentment of heavy-handed police tactics. An editorial by Peter Beaumont in the *Guardian* also noted that, while it would be easy to characterize Tottenham (where the riots started following the shooting of a 29-year-old man by police) as a 'bad place full of bad people', it would be more accurate to describe it as 'a poor place', with few amenities, especially for young people since the closure of 75 per cent of the borough's youth clubs, but also 'a good place, a vibrant mixed community within earshot of Spurs' White Hart Lane stadium'.<sup>6</sup> Today's mediascape may thus not be as black-and-white — in either sense — as it was forty years ago.

### Behind bars

Rayfield's comments about the BBC's documentary/current affairs programme *Man Alive* illustrate that the series, which began in 1965 and ran until 1981, was continuing its fine tradition of showing the viewing public what life in custody was like. Other programmes broadcast in the series at around this time included 'The Prisoner', about a petty criminal who had been in and out of prison since the age of 18 and managed to go straight for five years — marrying and starting a family — before ending up back inside prison (broadcast 14 July 1971); and the two-parter, *Women in Prison* (shown on 3 and 10 March 1971), in which women serving sentences in Holloway prison talked to camera about life behind bars, their attitudes to crime, their relationships inside and plans to pull down the old Holloway prison and build a new one<sup>7</sup>. The episode that caught Rayfield's attention, however, was titled 'Tale of Two Borstals' and his commentary on it provides an

2. Ibid: p. 50.

3. Cited *ibid*.

4. Ibid.

5. *Guardian* 8 August 2011.

6. *Guardian* 7 August 2011.

7. <http://ftvdb.bfi.org.uk/sift/series/438>

interesting insight into youth justice 1970s style. He notes that Portland was depicted as an 'oppressive, doom-laden place, forever shrouded in mist against a visual backcloth that would have done credit to a Hammer [Horror] Films production'. As the camera panned across a line of boys digging a trench, all that was missing to complete this bleak and, Rayfield intimates, slightly sinister, scene was 'the baying of hounds and the clank of chains'.

Again, comparisons are inevitable; I was left wondering what Rayfield would make of Rex Bloomstein's gritty documentary *Kids Behind Bars* or the BBC3 three-part series of the same name, broadcast in June 2011. The latter took cameras to Vinney Green Secure Unit and the first programme opened with several clips from CCTV footage showing 13-year-old boys fighting, throwing furniture, hurling pool balls at each other and making obscene gestures to the television camera. The 200 CCTV cameras situated around the Unit were one obvious difference with 1970s borstals, as were the privileges and punishments meted out for good and bad behaviour, many of which now revolve around television, radios, CD players and play stations. The tone of the programme was reasonably non-judgmental and ultimately optimistic as it showed a boy, Kalem, who was the longest resident of the Special Unit, go from being a troublesome and insecure boy who was frequently 'red carded' with loss of privileges such as television and vocational training for 48 hour periods to become a mature member of the Vinney Green community, a representative of the children's views in staff meetings and enjoying 'Platinum' level privileges (the highest attainable) for good behaviour. Another 13-year-old with severe anger problems (which he directed with terrifying ferocity at fellow YPs and staff alike) was nonetheless portrayed as having immensely likeable qualities. As he showed the camera crew around Vinney Green he pointed at the staffroom and said with refreshing frankness: 'That's where the staff talk shit to each other and eat biscuits'.

Although the first programme about some of the youngest children in the Unit was reasonably upbeat about their chances of turning their lives around, by the

third instalment of the series the tone was less hopeful. The programme followed three older boys as they prepared to leave Vinney Green, but emphasized that the inability of some residents to change during their time in the Unit meant that they face the prospect of beginning their adult life behind bars. Rex Bloomstein's film offers a similarly bleak message, albeit in a rather more complex and subtle package. As Jamie Bennett notes in one of several academic papers he has written about the celebrated director, Bloomstein's *Kids Behind Bars* does not offer any sort of rose-tinted view of custody for children. Instead the film suggests a regressive spiral as it moves from local authority care to prison, showing individual stories involving escalating levels of social dysfunction, crime and violence<sup>8</sup>.

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Rayfield notes that in the *Man Alive* programmes, the boys in both Portland and Hatfield (the latter being the cleaner and more civilized of the two borstals shown, according to the author) complained about being treated like children. I suspect that a similar sentiment underpins the statement of one of the boys in Bloomstein's film; 'We might be locked up, but we're not thick'. But, of course, the impression left on the audience is largely determined by editing and presentation. I was slightly surprised that BBC3 chose to subtitle their three programmes: 'I'm in Here for a Reason';

'Crying Cos I Can't Hit No-one' and 'It's Just My Life — Trouble', all of which are, at best, ambiguous. Rayfield's complaints about skilful editing, subjectivity and bias in 'Tale of Two Borstals' will be familiar to many who have watched television programmes on subjects they have experience of (in fact, his confession that he was *mentally* shouting at the box for much of the programme reveal him to be a master of self-restraint!) But his exasperation is clear in the comment that programmes such as this refuse to 'admit that society is responsible for the actions of its agents' and that 'If the programme sought to inform then it did not: if it sought to reform then its targets were the wrong ones'.

My suspicion is that this remains the case. Even Bloomstein, who has arguably done more than any other film-maker to reveal the experience of imprisonment and its harmful effects, and who has

8. Bennett, J. (2006) '“We might be locked up, but we're not thick”: Rex Bloomstein's *Kids Behind Bars*', *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal* 2(3): 268-285. p. 274.

also influenced those who have worked within the Prison Service (former Director General of the Prison Service, Martin Narey, has cited Bloomstein's *Strangeways* as the primary inspiration for his decision to join the service) may be effective only when, as it were, leaning against an open door. In other words, the empathy inherent in the documentary process may only be felt by those viewers who already share the narrative's perspective and have pre-existing sympathies with its subjects. While prison documentaries such as *Man Alive's* 'Tale of Two Borstals' and both versions of *Kids Behind Bars* undoubtedly create a profoundly important media space for more considered and thoughtful reflection than is usually to be found in other parts of the media<sup>9</sup>, the audience may inevitably view them — like any other media text — through the lens of their pre-existing cultural resources, experiences and prejudices.

At least in the early 1970s there were frequent television documentaries and current affairs programmes which gave voice to the lives, opinions and experiences of prisoners and did not rely on sensationalism, gimmicks or *faux-naïf* (as the *Guardian* always describes him) Louis Theroux, as much of today's 'reality' driven TV schedules seem to. Five years after the death penalty was abolished in this country, there was perhaps a particular curiosity about the penal system in 1971 (although the current situation of the highest ever prison population in England and Wales — partly as a result of harsh sentencing measures post-riots — does not seem to have piqued much interest in the media beyond the inevitable themes associated with populist punitiveness; dangerousness, risk, prisons-as-holiday-camps, and so on).

### ***New Society*: same old themes**

Of all the media that Alan Rayfield watched, listened to or read in the early 1970s, *New Society* strikes me as the most unusual and interesting. A weekly magazine devoted to social inquiry and cultural comment, and published between 1962 and 1987 (when it was subsumed into *New Statesman*), *New Society* was the social sciences version of the *New*

*Scientist* and has been described by one critic as 'a forum for the new intelligentsia'<sup>10</sup>. Drawing on the emergent disciplines of sociology, anthropology, psychology, human geography, social history and social policy, it was notable not only for its wide-ranging social reportage but for providing a platform for academics in these disciplines who were benefitting from the expansion of Higher Education in Britain from the early 1960s (for example, the University of Sussex was established in 1961 and the University of Essex was founded in 1964). Contributors to the publication included Angela Carter, Noam Chomsky, Stan Cohen, Eric Hobsbawm, George Melly and Dennis Potter, as well as Stuart Hall who is mentioned here. In an article published in the *Times Higher Education* supplement in 1995, Simon Frith reminisces about the unique appeal of *New Society*, which he read from cover to cover as a schoolboy:

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*Under the influence of the TV series, Probation Officer, I had already decided I wanted to do something 'social', and New Society became my handbook of the possibilities. I was most taken (I have still got the clipping) by Ray Gosling's 'The Tough and the Tender' (fourth in a series on adolescent morals) which appeared in issue 29, an account of a working-class teen values that to a sixth-form pop obsessive was at once completely familiar and quite strange'*<sup>11</sup>.

Alas, the appeal of a career in the Probation Service waned as Frith embarked on a career in academia although, given that he has held Chairs in English (at Strathclyde University), Sociology (at Warwick University), Film and Media (at Stirling University) and Music (at the University of Edinburgh), the eclectic reach of *New Society*, which embraced popular culture and the arts as well as policy, politics and social issues, may have had a lasting influence.

The absence of context in the reporting of news stories, noted by Stuart Hall in his *New Society* article and reiterated in Rayfield's *PSJ* contribution, is no less true in 2012, despite the proliferation of media channels and the 24/7 rolling nature of news production. One of Hall's complaints was that:

9. Bennett, *ibid*.

10. Hewison, R. (1986) *Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties*, Londo : Methuen.

11. 27 January 1995. Available at <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=162372&sectioncode=26>

*In the arena of news and foreign affairs, popular journalism does not permit systematic exploration in depth. In the quality press some measure of interpretation and background is more regularly provided...[but] for the populars, 'The Great British public is not interested in foreign news', though how the regular reader of the Mirror, the Express or the News of the World (Britain's circulation forerunners) could develop an intelligent interest in foreign affairs is a matter for speculation.*

Rayfield shares Hall's pessimism about the potential for the masses to become properly informed, given their daily diet of manufactured, populist and parochial news, but he brings it back to the world he knows best: 'In view of this, what hope has the prison officer of losing his 'warder' label?' Little could he know that 40 years later media institutions, including the British Broadcasting Corporation, still routinely use the term 'warder' and, equally shockingly, still refer to prisoners using the highly loaded word 'convicts'. Such discourses only serve to perpetuate the feelings of separation and moral distancing by society at large that are still keenly felt by prisoners and some prison officers.

The *PSJ* article suggests that two landmark events were shaping media coverage of penal matters in the early seventies. Unsurprisingly the Parkhurst riot and subsequent trial dominated the media-penal agenda and Rayfield's particular interest in the events at the Isle of Wight prison were prescient, given that he went on to govern the prison and, indeed, was Governor during the 1983 siege when his Deputy, Gerry Schofield, was held hostage and eventually released unharmed. Slightly more surprising is that, five years after it was initiated, Lord Mountbatten's report on security categorisation was still a hot topic of debate. Rayfield's reference to the subsequent growth of a siege mentality at the Home Office, and the ongoing angst

over what should be done with the most violent offenders, are problems that have never really gone away. But the comments in the final paragraph of the article, although slightly obscure, hint at Rayfield's own siege mentality as an employee of the Prison Service:

*The real question is: 'Does society want its Prison Service to succeed in its given task?' and the answer seems to be that it does not...not only must criminals be punished but so must those who deal with them since these are the agents of punishment. When these agents refuse to accept their role it forces society to examine the darker side of its nature<sup>12</sup>.*

Overall, the article 'The Media and the Message' is a rather gloomy summary of six months' media coverage of crime and punishment in the second half of 1970 but it provides a fascinating glimpse of a time when so much was different and yet so much was the same. I wonder what Alan Rayfield makes of today's media and message(s). According to MediaUK<sup>13</sup> there are currently 512 television channels, 738 radio stations, 1,594 newspapers and 1,970 magazine titles available in this country and programmes about American jails, supermax facilities and Death Row compete in the schedules with home-grown offerings about grisly 'true crimes', police car chases and prison-based variations on a theme (*Kids Behind Bars, Women Behind Bars, Babies Behind Bars* and so on). All of these might be interpreted as appealing to what the first Director General of the BBC, John Reith, referred to as the 'lowest common denominator' of public taste and today's media certainly fails to engage much with issues such as mental illness, self-harm and suicide within prisons. What Alan Rayfield's article indisputably demonstrates is that penal philosophies and policies may have changed but the underlying issues remain largely the same.

12. Hall, S. (1970) 'A World at One With Itself', *New Society* 18 June: 1056-8. P. 1058.

13. <http://www.mediauk.com/>