

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

November 2014 No 216



A Modus Vivendi — In-cell Television, Social Relations, Emotion and Safer Custody

Dr Victoria Knight, Senior Research Fellow, De Montfort University, Leicester.

This article documents some of the findings from a doctoral study examining the role of in-cell television in a closed adult male prison. Interviews with serving prisoners and staff indicate the complex nature of relationships (social relations) within prison settings. In particular, prisoners' relationships with other prisoners, especially those they share a cell with, was a significant feature of this research. Television's role within these dynamic relationships has personal, social and policy value for prisons and the people within them. This article draws upon two separate case examples of prisoners who, at the time of interview, shared a cell. The ways in which they relate to television and each other provides some initial understandings of what happens to prisoners when they share a cell together. The article ends by discussing the role of television in light of safer custody agendas.

Modus Vivendi: Finding ways to stay in control: Barry and Will

Television activity diaries completed in this study highlighted that most television in prison is viewed with another prisoner and so scope for carving out their 'own' viewing schedules is limited. Most respondents spoke about compromise or the need to accommodate others' viewing preferences, which often meant that not all of their viewing needs were met. Here, a *modus vivendi* is established to avoid conflict. Some talked about conflict over viewing schedules and the ways in which these differences are resolved.¹ Barry and Will separately disclosed their frustration over the other's viewing preferences and their domestic habits. Barry was not as keen as Will on sporting events. Will did not like Barry's choice of action movies and the lead actors in them. Hobson² describes how television audiences are separated by different tastes in television or 'two worlds' and this applies to Barry and Will:

Barry — *I've been having rows with pad mate cos the athletics is on, he's not bad but don't tell him. It was on all day yesterday. Last week I watched what I wanted with a view to him*

watching the athletics and 'Match of the Day'. I don't want to watch it, especially after 5 hours, I'm climbing the walls. He ain't bothered though. He hates Steven Segal and Jean Claude van Dam, he hates it I know it winds him up. I leave the toilet seat up too. We get on alright. I know him from in here.

Within this confined space two separate cultures evolve and do not always nestle well together. The few things they share are the experience of being in prison. Learning to compromise and be tolerant of each other requires personal control and a willingness to ratify a treaty or surrender. Layder's³ application of Goffman's 'interaction order' can account for how individuals find ways to look after their 'social self' and dealing with problems in social life results in 'mutual moral obligations'.⁴ Will corroborates what Barry states about their planned viewing and sometimes viewing together is achieved. Will's interest in sport is enabled by a sustained sacrifice of his viewing preferences in order to 'bank' television time with his cell mate,

Will — *Like in the last 2 weeks I told him to watch what he wanted cos I knew sport was on. He enjoys football I think, he does get into it. We have a cup of tea and sit on the bed and watch it.*

Barry describes how planning together helps to establish a shared television routine in which a rhythm of mutual viewing can evolve,

Barry — *I plan TV and mark it down, we also plan it together. He is the DVD orderly, I tell him what I fancy and he brings it. We have as many as we like really. Tonight we've got 'Shooting Gallery'. We'll watch a DVD at bang up between 12-2pm and on Saturdays and Sundays we can do 3 DVDs back to back.*

By having a shared ritual they develop their own social rules, and these become ratified as time spent with each other in these circumstances goes on.⁵ However this

1. Gersch, B. (2003) *Dis/connected: Media Use Among Inmates* Unpublished PhD Oregon, University of Oregon USA.
2. Hobson, D. (1980) *Housewives and Mass Media Culture, Media and Language* p109.
3. Layder, D. (2004) *Emotion in Social Life: The Lost Heart of Society* London, Sage.
4. *Ibid* (2004) p18.
5. *Ibid* (2004) p18.

is not always a seamless or innocent negotiation. Will admits that he will deliberately select programmes which challenge Barry's taste:

Will — *Sometimes I do the opposite to him. I can't stand Jean Claude Van Damm and Steven Segal or crime and 'The Bill'. I like 'Panorama', 'Dispatches', 'News on ITV', but not regional. 'The Bill' is most frustrating, it is police orientated, a warped perspective of what police do.*

The game-playing⁶ can in part help to temper their own frustrations and manage a situation which most find intolerable. Moreover in a climate in which boredom is commonplace, conflict can emerge as a response to these conditions.⁷ Furthermore, finding and sustaining power within the cell requires focus, and the playful nature they describe underlies their attempts to sustain personal control.⁸ On the surface Barry and Will wanted to present an egalitarian version of their domestic circumstances, yet Barry's description describes how his own power could not be fully realized with Will, due to a prisoner code:⁹

Barry — *We have a remote each now, we normally pass it to each other. My pad mate was in his cell before me so it is his pad, when he moves out it then becomes mine. Mind you I moved into a cell and there was a young lad and I told him to shift. I didn't bully him, I just told him. I don't like to associate with people in here some are nasty, but I know who is good. My pad mate is not bad but he is never wrong. He has a way of saying stuff. We like 'Star Trek', when we were kids, our era. We just like it. You see things in 'Star Trek' and 'Star Wars'.*

Finding common ground and the ability to relax in these awkward circumstances is important to make the situation bearable and meaningful. Sharing programmes they both enjoy provides respite from potential tension and conflict. In maintaining the 'self as a finely tuned security system',¹⁰ they can function with less effort as they become united:¹¹

Will — *My pad mate's choice 'Big, Bigger and Biggest', I enjoy that. He sometimes says 'that's amazing' but we don't normally talk, that is a*

sign of a good pad mate. If you can sit in silence. I remember this chap, one of the bully boys, like making demands, I think it was a lack of education to deal with problems, there are arguments sometimes. Like my pad mate we have arguments sometimes, his hygiene levels, he smokes and the toilet. You have got to respect each other and he snores. TV is great for your mental health, but you need ear plugs for your sanity, but it is more to do with his snoring. In daytime I might watch 'Countdown' or sports. My pad mate watches 'Murder She Wrote' and 'Heartbeat'! I'd murder that Angela Lansbury. Curtain twitchers watch that stuff.

Will explains that television provides an escape from his environment and the people within it. Will may worry about the potential risk his pad mate could pose, as he knows about the way the prison had managed Barry as a high risk prisoner. This means Will needs to tread carefully. Barry described the violent crime he was involved in and this will have been assessed as a factor of significant risk. Inadvertently, these kinds of actuarial assessments can highlight and inflame the pathological label. Will therefore may be worried about the contaminating effects Barry could have on him, and experiencing large quantities of time in a confined space with a 'dangerous' prisoner can induce fear. Television, if handled and negotiated properly, can provide respite from these tensions. Striving for ontological security¹² using television can offer protective factors against unsettling and distressing emotions like frustration or fear.

Will — *In the evenings TV is separation from my pad mate I get head space from him. I think he was single cell and high risk, so I need head space from him. I'm a private person. I enjoy my own company. My pad mate is a big kid — it is frustrating. In here sometimes you are forced into violent situations. It is divide and conquer with other prisoners, it is much easier to control and we become products of our environment.*

Their relationship requires 'a rational plan' in order for them to co-exist in the same cell without conflict.¹³ Planning television viewing and bargaining are techniques which help to maintain an amicable relationship, sharing

6. McDermott, K. & King, R. (1988) Mind games: where the action is in prisons *British Journal of Criminology* Vol.28:3 pp357-78 Gersch, B. (2003) Dis/connected: Media Use Among Inmates Unpublished PhD Oregon, University of OregonUSA.
7. Barbalet, J. M. (1999) Boredom and Social Meaning *British Journal of Sociology* Vol.50:4 pp631-649.
8. Layder, D. (2004) Emotion in Social Life: The Lost Heart of Society London, Sage p17.
9. Sykes, G. (1999) The Society of Captives: A Study of A Maximum Security Prison New Jersey, Princeton University Press
10. Crewe, B. (2005) Codes and conventions: the terms and conditions of contemporary inmate values in Liebling, A, & Maruna, S. (eds) (2005) *The Effects of Imprisonment* Collumpton, Willan.
11. Layder, D. (2004) Emotion in Social Life: The Lost Heart of Society London, Sage.
12. Kubey, R. (1990) Television and The Quality of Family Life *Communication Quarterly* Vol.38:4 pp312-324.
13. Layder, D. (2004) Emotion in Social Life: The Lost Heart of Society London, Sage.
13. Ibid.

the remote control for example and Will providing Barry with DVDs are ways in which help to temper conflict. Will has clear distaste for Barry's television choices and Barry finds Will's love of sport tedious; both manifesting as frustration. Despite these differences some common ground was achievable and Barry's testimony in relation to sci-fi was an opportunity for these individuals to identify a bond or intimacy via television; bringing them together¹⁴ and achieving reasonable harmony.

Friendship, survival and time together: Shaun and Lee

At the time of interview Shaun and Lee were subject to basic conditions and their television had been removed for bad behaviour. This meant that time out of cell, visits and access to goods and services were limited, resulting in extended periods of bang-up. In the absence of television, Shaun found he read and wrote more, something he got great pleasure from. Lee enjoyed dance music, which Shaun also liked. Unlike Barry and Will, Shaun and Lee's relationship appeared more settled; they shared similar taste in music, shared a past before prison and also liked crime novels and similar television and radio programmes. Shaun's taste was more diverse than Lee's; he also liked wildlife programmes, rock and pop music. Both were very familiar with popular soap storylines and characters. They were concerned about boredom and the impact that certain kinds of broadcasts would have on their well-being,

Lee — *My typical day is in a morning if I had TV I'd turn on 'Jeremy Kyle' then get lunch and sit there all day until dinner. I get bored of watching it, it is the same everyday. It makes time drag with telly. You know how long they are on for and then it is dinner time. It is one big time game here. Time flies with me and him [Shaun]. We get up and clean pad and we jump up and do something. But cos TV might be on you're just lying on your bed. I go to sleep at lunch and we have a messy pad. I clean in evenings all the time.*

Shaun — *There is crap on TV. TV in your cell is ok like if you weren't working and nothing to do. But in the day it is rubbish like 'Build a*

House in the Country', 'Trisha', 'Wright Stuff' — crappy, shitty, rubbish. But then TV is something to look at, something to stare at. Day time fries your head, scrambled brain, it makes people anti-social, no one talks when the telly is on. You talk, but it is not a conversation, like saying 'Oh she's fit', 'yeah' it is not a proper conversation. There is no danger with TV in prison, it entertains people, keeps people quiet, good for reducing suicides, but it gives people a lot of power, even the prisoners. Like some folks can't read, folks haven't got a stereo, so TV helps. But without it for me it is easy, I can read and write.

Given their attitude towards the dominance that television can have in their lives in prison, their current experience on the basic regime without television highlights how getting by and doing their time can essentially be experienced more positively. Shaun especially felt more motivated and compelled to read and write,

**Television, for Shaun,
is a distraction,
something that gets
in the way of what
he considers to be
more purposeful.**

Shaun — *I've been 3 weeks without TV cos I am on basic. It is much better, I feel more motivated to do things such as cell work-outs, read books, write more like poetry, a book. If I had TV I'd only just*

be starting... But I don't miss them. I suppose if I had a TV that magically came on and then switched off that would be good — but it is too tempting to leave on and then you become a bed spud — it becomes the be all and end all of your life in here. If my pad mate watches 'Emmerdale', I'll write a letter.

They also show 'sensitivity to spatiality' which is accentuated by their segregation from the standard regime.¹⁵ Television, for Shaun, is a distraction, something that gets in the way of what he considers to be more purposeful. Shaun realises that reading and writing was something that was out of his focus, until he encountered prison without television. Shaun does recognise the pleasures of television, but like many respondents in this study finds it hard to switch off and regulate viewing quantities. Lee is less confident about the absence of television. For Lee music (which is permitted on basic regime) can provide sufficient stimulation, but he struggles more than Shaun with bang-up time,

14. Lull, J. (1990) *Inside Family Viewing: Ethnographic Research on Television Audiences* London, Routledge.

15. Martel, J. (2006) To Be, One Has To Be Somewhere: Spatio-temporality in Prison Segregation *British Journal of Criminology* Vol. 46:4 pp587-612.

Lee — *Music makes you think about other things so you can go behind your door and get away and stay behind your door. I'm alright to talk but it does wind you up also behind your door... it deads my head in this shit. I just cope with it really, but it does wind me up. It is a joke with the staff. My cell mate helps.*

Tolerance of isolation and exposure to unstructured time can differ, and coping and adaptation to the conditions of incarceration is variable. Their friendship helps Lee handle these conditions. Under the basic regime, contact with others would be minimal and therefore interaction between themselves in their cells becomes increasingly significant. The solidarity they have can be evidenced in how they plan to manage television once it is re-introduced,

Lee — *We've planned a routine with telly it was his [Shaun] idea, I ain't bothered. I'm getting lazy just lying in bed watching TV all night. I don't like been lazy. I like to get up and be out there and be busy. But here I don't want to do anything, it is a waste of time doing nothing.*

Shaun fears idleness and the intrusion of the outside world once television enters his life again,

Shaun — *Prison is depressing, nothing happens and to have the outside shoved in your face is hard. I don't want to think about it whilst I am here. I'm in my cell all day. I need a certain level of exercise, it lets off steam and you are then not thinking and things playing on your mind. I manage to block it out all day and then it all just hits you all before you go to sleep. I struggle with sleep in here and suppose TV can help with that. Like when I couldn't get to sleep and find myself watching Big Brother.*

Despite the benefits Shaun describes, contact with the outside world is too painful. Withdrawal from public life is not an uncommon response amongst prisoners, especially long-termers.^{16 17} Shaun was a remand prisoner and explained he was probably going to get a life sentence for his crime. Being able to comprehend, witness and be intimate with a world in which he cannot participate may explain his need to disconnect. This is the same world that has confined him to prison and put him

in social care as a child. The visual qualities of television for Shaun are an intrusion into his life¹⁸ and therefore do not suit Shaun's needs at this time. He is grateful to spend time without television and escape the punctuated nature of broadcasts,¹⁹

Shaun — *I thank them for putting me on basic, I love it. I don't want my TV back, but I do want visits and associations. They don't like that, that I don't want a TV. I'm not in cell crying. I have a choice you see. Time goes quicker this way, I suppose you analyse yourself. I like TV on at certain times and not having a clock. Like the adverts, they come on roughly every 15 minutes and so on, so you get the time all the time. Without a stereo it is hard. You have a 45 minute tape I suppose, but there isn't a constant tab on time. I don't want to know what time it is.*

Lee on the other hand imagines a routine in which television would feature in his 'own' schedule rather than he being dominated by television all of the time.²⁰ Lee also described how he had struggled to overcome drug addiction, and finding techniques to control his drug use could also be extended to his use of television,

Lee — *...the punishment doesn't bother me. I just take it. I could leave the TV on the doorstep when they move me to level 2. They are winding me up saying I could have a telly. If they offered me a telly I'd turn on in the morning for the news then keep it off. I'd have it on in the lunch hour and in the afternoon it would be off. It would be on in the evening for the soaps. Then I would do a pad work out to music, switch it back on to fall asleep.*

Television helps Lee to punctuate his daily life in prison and he actively aligns television to certain activities. The combination of imprisonment and television accentuates the fears of becoming idle, akin to addiction.²¹ Becoming dependent on television is something the respondents were conscious of and where media dependency²² reaches a level that they considered to be unhealthy, television could become dissatisfactory. This draining effect of television steals important energy and stifles attempts to remain ontologically secure. As

16. Cohen, S. & Taylor, L. (1972) *Psychological Survival: The Experience of Long-Term Imprisonment* Middlesex, Pelican.

17. Sapsford, R.J. (1978) *Life-Sentence Prisoners: Psychological Changes During Sentence* *British Journal of Criminology* Vol. 18:2 pp128-145.

18. Spigel, L. (1992) *Make Room for TV* Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

19. Scannell, P. (1996) *Radio, Television and Modern Life* Oxford, Blackwell.

20. Silverstone, R. (1999) *Television and Everyday Life* London: Routledge.

21. Jewkes, Y (2002) *Captive Audience: Media, masculinity and power in prison* Collumpton, Willan.

22. Vandeboosch, H. (2000) *Research Note: A Captive Audience? The Media Use of Prisoners* *European Journal of Communication* Vol.15:4 pp529-544.

Rubin²³ found, those individuals with internal locus of control were less likely to be susceptible to these kinds of effects, whereas individuals with an external locus of control and are more likely to take up more television are more likely to be dissatisfied with the activity. Taking responsibility for their viewing is a mechanism for resolving pervasive attitudes, which can be destructive. Avoiding the 'docile'²⁴ aspect of incarceration serves to ensure that their personal control remains functioning. Losing control by becoming docile can weaken their ability to govern themselves and thus they may become susceptible to subordination of the situated or mediated encounters. The techniques outlined by Shaun and Lee enabled them to secure meaning and control in their disorientating circumstances. The re-introduction of television presents a threat to the equilibrium they have managed to achieve in its absence.

Television and Safer Custody

The two case studies presented in this article outline how television can contribute to the 'work' of the prison. The dominant outcome of this research is that television is co-opted by prisoners in attempts to self-regulate and control their emotive responses to prison life. Inadvertently, television is therefore contributing to the efforts to maintain control and assist in the delivery of care — television is put to work and thus contributes to what Crewe²⁵ defines as a mechanism for 'soft-power', enabling services to govern at a distance. Television has normalised the experience of the cell, in part replicating the comforting aspects of domestic life which result in legitimating the power structures which operate at a distance.

Television provides the prison with a resource which unwittingly distracts and occupies the prisoner in a number of ways. So much so, that other opportunities have either been removed or declined in popularity. The removal of 'stage' newspapers (free daily newspapers for prisoners) from prisons in 2005 has been attributed by some commentators to the introduction of in-cell television.²⁶ Before its introduction, policy makers and politicians made reasonable judgements of the value of

in-cell television by anticipating its impact on calming or 'settling' of prisoners, assisting with loneliness and boredom and above all achieving control of the setting and its people. The findings of this study, as well as that of others²⁷ support what policy makers anticipated were reasonably close to findings from research. The placing of television in the cell, however, means that these 'benefits' have wider and diverse ramifications on prisoners and the prison and thus actually extend beyond the original aims of introducing in-cell television.

A major outcome in prisons has been the regulation of the 'emotional economy'²⁸ and the regulation of emotion has enabled and accompanied increased control of prisoner behaviour.^{29,30} Television is one of the few outlets for prisoners to manage their emotionality. Television's place across social relations contributes to 'neo-paternalistic' agendas, where television is used to foster control with less direct intervention from staff and thus satisfying safer custody priorities.

If television did not deliver 'care-giving' qualities, prisoner audiences would be reluctant to use it.³¹ This raises important questions about the framing of television as 'care-giver'. There is a problem of 'care' in prison settings, which results in care being mostly self-directed and television is one functional mechanism to assist in this. It is observable that there is a dichotomous relationship between care and control. The experience of television is secured by attachments to it in the promise of achieving basic or ontological security. Instead, personal and inter-personal control resembles care of the self. Tait³² has recently attempted to capture the nature and typologies of care among prison officers. The ambiguity of care is accentuated by the prevalence of control and this may result in care being difficult. Instead it is suggested that television is not necessarily 'care giving', it is 'care enabling'. Television's contribution is to normalise the experience of prison and especially attempt to make the cell more palatable and attractive. Television is therefore placed in the cell with unanticipated outcomes for therapeutic control, and inadvertently television is exploited to achieve control. This extends the remit originally intended by policy makers at the introduction of in-cell television to prison.

-
23. Rubin, A.M. (1993) The Effect of Locus Control on Communication Motivation, Anxiety, and Satisfaction *Communication Quarterly* Vol.41:2 pp161-171.
 24. Foucault, M. (1991) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* London, Penguin.
 25. Crewe, B. (2011) Soft power in prison: Implications for staff-prisoner relationships, liberty and legitimacy Vol. 8:6 pp455-468.
 26. James, E (2005) Never a Luxury *The Guardian* 14/6/05 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2005/jun/14/prisonsandprobation.erwinjames> accessed 12.9.11
 27. Jewkes, Y (2002) Captive Audience: Media, masculinity and power in prison Collumpton, Willan Gersch, B. (2003) Dis/connected: Media Use Among Inmates Unpublished PhD Oregon, University of Oregon USA Vandebosch, H. (2000) Research Note: A Captive Audience? The Media Use of Prisoners *European Journal of Communication* Vol.15:4 pp529-544.
 28. Rose, N. (1999) *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* London, Routledge p225.
 29. Pratt, J. (1999) Norbert Elias and the civilized prison *British Journal of Sociology* Vol. 50:2 pp271-296.
 30. Garland, D. (1991) *Punishment and Modern Society: A Study in Social Theory* Oxford, Clarendon.
 31. Silverstone, R. (1999) *Television and Everyday Life* London: Routledge.
 32. Tait, S. (2011) A typology of prison officer approaches to care *European Journal of Criminology* Vol. 8:6 pp440-454.