

Civil Dead Radio: Prisoners in the public sphere.

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“How well the public sphere functions becomes a concrete manifestation of society’s democratic character and thus in a sense the most immediately visible indicator of our admittedly imperfect democracies” (Dahlgren 1991, p. 2).

Public sphere activity is an important theoretical concept because of “its potential as a social mode of societal integration” (Calhoun 1992, p. 6). Public spheres facilitate means of engaging members of society in discussion and debate about issues of mutual concern. Theories of the public sphere are integrally linked to notions of democracy and the media. It is important, however, not to confuse the public sphere and the media for the same entity.

A version of the public sphere has always existed “as an appendage to democratic theory” (Dahlgren 1991, p. 1). Citizen’s media theory (Rodriguez 2001) encourages us to consider grassroots media projects in terms of how democracy is enhanced, participants are empowered and citizenship is enacted outside of the parameters of enfranchisement. Can engagement within the public sphere benefit democracy, as imperfect as democracy may be? Does public sphere activity enhance a person’s societal integration? To answer

these questions I examine media produced by and for one of the most excluded sections of society (to the point of facing ‘civil death’), that is prisoners.

Prisoners radio, public space, and citizenship.

Defining public sphere activity has dominated research in this area and I do not intend to re-visit these debates in this paper. I take as given that Habermas’ (1989) theory of the public sphere, where political participation is enacted through the medium of talk and where citizens deliberate about their common affairs, is considered indispensable (if not contentious) in terms of theorising democracy and also that contemporary public sphere theory (for example Downey and Fenton 2003; Fraser 1999; Calhoun 1992; Curran 1991) applies these elements to a wide range of public sphere activity applicable to alternative media frameworks.

Prisoners’ radio, on the other hand, has afforded very little academic research and therefore will need to be defined before engaging in any meaningful discussion.

Prisoners’ radio usually incorporates programs that play requests to and from prisoners, their families and friends, frequently with accompanying messages. They broadcast news stories, interviews, documentaries and other information that relates to prison and justice issues. Sometimes they may broadcast from inside a detention centre or work with inmates to produce their own radio pieces. Prisoners’ programming can involve prisoners, former prisoners, their friends and family, government representatives and/or social justice activists and centres, as well as radio broadcasters.

Almost all prisoners' radio exists as part of the community (or public) radio sector. For this paper I draw upon research for my doctoral work, primarily a case study of Brisbane station 4ZZZ's program *Locked In*. *Locked In* is a two hour show and at the time of writing three former prisoners were involved as presenters, along with two trained 4ZZZ announcers. 4ZZZ has included a prisoners' show in its programming (under various names) since the early 1980's (Tracey as cited in Williams, 2000) and I have personally been involved with *Locked In* on an irregular basis since the mid 1990's as a journalist and occasional presenter. Through the research for this PhD I have developed a closer relationship to the program and am currently a regular announcer and producer. My research has principally combined content analysis, interviews, research diaries and internet communications.

At this point it may also be pertinent to expand further the concept of citizenship in terms of a radical democratic framework (the basis of Rodriguez' citizens' media theory) grounded in deliberative/participatory ideals. Radical democratic theory places citizenship as central to its ideologies and strengthens arguments for approaching public sphere activity as a form of active citizenship. Mouffe (1992, p.4) places the idea of citizenship at the core of executing true democratic practices and describes a radical democratic citizen as one who is active, "somebody who *acts* as a citizen, who conceives of herself as a participant in a collective undertaking". Citizenship is valued because it equips members of society to develop the capacities for judgement, exercise their own

powers of agency and attain “by concerted action some measure of political efficacy” (Passerin d’Entreves 1992, p. 146).

Ultimately, the public sphere remains public because participation is signified in terms of both informal and formal citizenship. Multiple public sphere activity provides alternative forums where members may enact their citizenship to participate in debate, disputation and discussion relevant to their lives. This is an imperative concept because it allows us to think of exclusion from citizenship in terms of exclusion from the public sphere – an important factor when considering prisoners who, by definition almost, are consciously stripped of citizenship rights.

Prison issues in the public sphere

A prison sentence has traditionally included loss of rights so as to deny a person their citizenship as well as their liberty -- “at law that person is dead” (Ridley-Smith and Redman, 2002, p. 284). Through civil death prisoners are marked as being without honour and without the right to participate in public life (Orr, 1998 in Ridley-Smith and Redman, 2002). Foucault (1995) also defines the prisoner as disqualified from citizenship and argues the secrecy of prisons is an essential element of their regular function.

The development of democracy in the West has coincided historically with the emergence of the mass media as a dominant institution of the public sphere (Dahlgren 1991) and the relationships between the media and the public sphere have traditionally

focused on mass or mainstream media. The general public knows less about imprisonment than about any other stage of the justice system (Surette, 2007; Roberts and Hough, 2005). Fictional representations of the prison (such as the movie *Ghosts ... of the Civil Dead* and the television series *Oz*) significantly effect wider understandings of prison issues. Roberts and Hough (2005) found that 12 per cent of a sample of the British public identified detective series, films and other *fictional* television programs as having the most influence on their views on prison matters.

At the same time law and order issues consistently dominate electoral politics and outside election time the mass communications industry ensures they are a staple in everyday public debate (Hogg and Brown 1998). The nature of mass culture itself makes it easier for those in power to disseminate their views “but harder for marginal voices to talk back” (Warner 2002, p. 49). Jacobs (1999) warns that news media form imperfect public spheres as they tend to only provide partial access organised and structured in predictable ways. Access to the media is stratified with the news media playing an important role in deciding who has the opportunity to “communicate with larger publics” (Bennett et al 2004, p. 437). News gathering practices are not dictated by the desire to present the most compelling argument or include a variety of voices but rather the desire to tell the best story (Jacobs 1999) or even *sell* the best story. Can prisoners’ radio address such imbalances and facilitate access to the public domain? Can such media be considered as facilitating, or even improving, meaningful public sphere activity?

Prisoners voices within the public sphere

Dahlgren (1991) asks to what extent does the mass media help members of society learn about the world around them, debate their responses to this information and reach informed decisions on how to act upon these reactions? Media in all its forms contribute to the public sphere on a number of levels. At its most basic, media consumers are exposed to information, entertainment, news, culture and ideas. Such exposure directly influences discussions and conversations as people share their opinions about current affairs, television, sport, film, theatre and other entertainment. While this in itself does not necessarily constitute public sphere activity, subsequent dialogue and debate results from the provision of such information, influencing citizens to engage in deliberative processes and make decisions about collective affairs.

Prisoners' radio provides an alternative outlet for discussing prison and prisoners' issues within a wider public arena. As mentioned previously, prisons are under-reported and often mis-represented institutions. Prisoners' radio programs or projects address this by disseminating prison and law and order information, usually in the form of interviews, documentaries, news and discussion. For example Prisoners Justice Day (PJD) programming on community and campus radio in Canada is a national event involving stations across the country including CKUT 90.3 FM, Montreal, Quebec, CKLN 88.1FM, Toronto, Ontario; CJSF 90.1FM, Burnaby, British Columbia and Co-op Radio, Vancouver, British Columbia.

To give an illustration of the breadth of information broadcast during Prisoners Justice Day, in 2004 CKLN broadcast prison-related issues in various time slots from August the 7th to August the 12th. Content included a live broadcast from a PJD event “Bound and Gagged: When Art Becomes Contraband”; Voices from the Inside, a show broadcasting pre-recorded messages from prisoners sharing what Prisoners’ Justice day means to them; a program looking at the cases of famous political prisons from around the world; excerpts from former prisoner and anti-prison activist Angela Davis speaking about abolition movements, and documentaries on a wide range of issues including The Ion Scan (which tests prison visitors for traces of illegal drugs), the privatisation of prisons, the death penalty for children and health care in prison.

Evidence of how prisoners’ radio affects the wider public also exists from my case study that may not point specifically to wider public sphere activity but indicates the effects *Locked In* has had on the 4ZzZ community or public sphere. One week a listener and subscriber visited the radio station during *Locked In* bringing with him 14 songs that were previous unfulfilled requests from prisoners. The 4ZzZ record library, while extensive, has its limitations (especially in relation to more mainstream music) so *Locked In* is often unable to meet all of the show’s requests. My research diary at that time recorded this event as such:

It turns out he actually bought some of the CDs himself so we could play them.

[The listener/subscriber] has a friend in prison so I guess he appreciates the work 4ZzZ is doing. I think it is great to see other listeners getting behind the prisoners’

show. I guess it's testimony to what the show's doing that is generating such empathy.

On another occasion 4ZZZ program *Queer Radio* donated two books of poetry written by a former female prisoner to be given away as prizes on *Locked In*. My research diary also records comments from other 4ZZZ announcers explaining how the program has changed their understandings of what it meant to be in prison. During 4ZZZ's 30th birthday celebrations (December 2005) *Locked In* was mentioned twice in an on-air series where announcers talked about their favourite shows on 4ZZZ.

Quite often the personal lives of prisoners become a directive force upon the narrative of the prisoners' program, placing their lives within the public sphere on a level not usually experienced. Relationships are played out through messages in letters and phone calls, children wish their fathers "Merry Christmas" live on the radio and parole dates are counted down. These interactions are more than just 'the personal' being played out in the public.

Kelly just called up and is sending a message out to Scotty. She says
"congratulations honey, the worst is over, can't wait to catch up and have a chat today. Did you get my kite [letter] today? If so, help me. Love always, Kelly.

(*Locked In*, March 6, 2006)

Alpha Girl says she's still waiting for an answer from the parole board, they are sitting again tonight, she is hoping for an answer this week and...she says she'll

ring your grandparents as soon as she knows anything and if you don't get a message from them about it that means then nothing has happened and she doesn't know anything and she says "I love you to death and miss you more and more everyday". (*Locked In*, May 15, 2006)

There is a personalisation effect that carries over to the wider listening audience. As a news value, human interest can be a "united force in reminding people of their shared humanity" (Conley 1997, p. 71). While I have no direct evidence beyond the anecdotal comments of listeners I believe it would be inevitable that the personalisation of prisoners' issues would influence a wider audience's deliberation on issues relating to both prisoners and law and order.

Prisoners' own public spheres

Jacobs (1999) explores the history of the "Black public sphere" in the United States to illustrate why marginalised groups cannot solely concentrate upon mainstream media and dominant public spheres. He argues that by establishing an independent Black press, African-Americans were able to secure a space of self-representation not only to develop arguments which might effectively engage white society, but to craft common identities and solidarities as well as nurture the growth of new public leaders (Jacobs 1999).

Squires (2002) defines this secure space as an enclave public sphere, born as a response to hide counterhegemonic strategies and ideas in order to avoid sanctions or merely to survive while internally producing debate and ideas.

The main objective of prisoners' radio is not necessarily to supply a wider audience with information but rather to provide a voice and a support network for prisoners and their loved ones. For example *Locked In* aims to give prisoners' access to the media and to participate in the life of the community, and keep prisoners and their loved ones' in touch with each other as well as provide information regarding imprisonment (N. Debrezini, personal communication, January 29, 2005). As such, an enclave public sphere develops where prisoners and their loved ones speak to each other through letters about the issues facing them, crafting common identities through their own language and content. Beyond this listeners take the content of *Locked In* away with them when they engage in their own enclave public spheres within the institution, as is reported by listeners:

When issues are brought up on the show, they are often discussed the morning after. In most cases they are discussed a lot more in depth than time restrictions would allow them to be on the show. These discussions not only include the show's listeners but anyone else the issue is relevant to. (A.D. in Arthur Gorrie Correctional Centre, Brisbane, February 11 2007)

The topic of the conversation throughout the centre with those that I speak to, which is just about everybody on the Monday and Tuesday, is 4ZZZ. (S.W.P in Wolston Correctional Centre, Brisbane, February 9, 2007)

The show fully gets us talking on Tuesday morning. It's the topic with the brew in the morning. (L.S. at Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre, February 9, 2007)

Prisoners also reported learning about prison news and issues in the same ways people in the wider community receive information from *Locked In*. This is important because prisoners' access to information in the media is often more restricted. For example, internet access is highly uncommon. In the case of the current plans to build a new prison in Gatton Queensland, Corrective Services (QLD) utilise their website to provide the public with extensive information about their intentions. A *Locked In* listener recently wrote to the show saying he was not allowed to receive printed information about the Gatton development in the mail and therefore could only keep updated on the issue through what he heard on the radio program (*Locked In*, 12 March, 2007). Other prisoners support this claim:

I think the show does explain and help people...Some weeks Zim and Blue [program presenters] tell us stuff we wouldn't know if they didn't say anything. (L.S. at Brisbane Women's Correctional Centre, February 9, 2007)

You'se always let us know what is going on within these walls (shit that we can't find out). (*G. H. Feb 2007*)

Conclusion

Public sphere activity is a form of political participation that has the potential to actively engage people as citizens in the radical sense of democracy. For people to exercise their citizenship rights fully they need access to a wide range of information on issues that

involve political choices, opportunities to contribute to such representations and also access to advice, analysis and information that may assist them to understand and effectively pursue their personal rights. This information more often than not comes from multiple media sources.

Alternative media, such as community radio, assists wider participation in the modern day circuit of power. Prisoners' radio exposes the audience to extensive information about prisoner and prison issues and engages both the wider society and prisoners in discussion about these topics. Within prisoners' own public spheres, further deliberation occurs as an enclave response to the corrective services 'system'. This dual role is characteristic of most alternative public spheres and demonstrates the multiple power levels on which we all operate. People may feel powerless when agitating against the dominant culture but maintain a sense of power within the context of their own enclave.

By fostering multi-layered public sphere activity, prisoners' radio can generate an alternative sense of citizenship within those considered the civil dead as well as contribute to the public decision making of all members of society. If democracy lies (as Mouffe 1992 says) in radical democratic citizens who conceive of themselves as participants in a collective undertaking, then prisoners' radio is certainly contributing to this ideal.

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