

‘Cavemen in an Era of Speed-of-Light Technology’: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Communication within Prisons

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Abstract

Many prisoners believe that the restricted access they have to computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies and, in particular, the almost total absence of computers and Internet access in prisons is a form of censure that renders them second-class citizens in the Information Age. This article examines contemporary rationales and historical precedents for denying prisoners the means to communicate (both with each other and with those outside the prison) and argues that the prevention of communication, a pivotal feature of the Victorian and Edwardian prison regime, represents a significant continuity in the experience of prison life in the 21st Century.

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Many prisoners believe that the restricted access they have to computer-mediated communication (CMC) technologies and, in particular, the almost total absence of computers and Internet access in prisons is a form of censure that renders them second-class citizens in the Information Age. This article discusses the current situation regarding CMCs in prisons and assesses the benefits that could arise from expanding the network across the prison estate and giving prisoners the same kinds of communication freedoms enjoyed by the population at large. It further considers historical precedents for denying prisoners the means to communicate (both with each other and with those outside the prison) and argues that the prevention of communication, a pivotal feature of the Victorian and Edwardian prison regime, represents a significant continuity in the experience of prison life in the 21st Century.

While England and Wales lags behind many of its European neighbours in relation to CMCs in prisons there have been significant moves forward in the last few years and several important initiatives are taking place across the prison estate. In the realm of education and training, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Further Education and Lifelong Learning has argued that facilities for distance learning and e-learning should be enhanced in every prison, and supervised Internet access made available to prisoners doing courses that require it. A consultation document drafted by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) on prison technology acknowledges that freedom of access to some online services is 'a basic right of citizenship which should be proactively supported within disadvantaged communities and extended into custodial regimes' (Lindfield *et al.* 2008, p.18). The document emphasises that in prison these rights need to be constrained and managed in the same context as other rights, such as access to visits, letters, television, books and education, but it is broadly positive about the potential for CMCs in prison:

Subject to a suitable new charter for on-line access for prisoners in prison, there is a case for some 'continuity of access' in the transition into and from custody, especially for those on remand. This would require the creation and maintenance of an on-line identity for individual prisoners and ideally this would be in a form that the prisoner could retain after release. Providing facilities that allowed prisoners to acquire basic IT and keyboard skills, albeit in a very restricted environment, would have an educational benefit in addition to any savings arising from the more effective use of staff time. (p.18)

Some individual prison governors have been favourably disposed to the idea of online learning for several years: for example, the governor at HMP Chelmsford has pioneered a scheme whereby foreign national prisoners can study online in their own language on condition that they study English language classes as well. The online learning organisation, Learndirect, which operates a network of more than 2,000 e-learning centres, has installed servers and networked PCs in 20 prisons. These are used to deliver courses in literacy and numeracy and to impart skills for employment. The networking company, Cisco, has set up centres in 18 prisons under a scheme called the Prisons ICT Academy (PICTA). Several hundred prisoners have completed courses that cover basic computer skills and PC maintenance (see <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/Database/prisonupdate.html> (accessed 11 March 2007)). Another development is Summit Media, a digital media company which runs its operation from within HMP Wolds and HMP Rye Hill. At HMP Wolds, 25 prisoners have completed a full training programme in order to work producing websites and online marketing services to companies doing business on the web (see http://www.hmpwolds.co.uk/main_pages/prison_industry.htm (accessed 18 June 2008)).

While these initiatives are very important, they remain limited given the potential scope for prison Internet access. Currently only seven prisons in the UK offer Internet use, and it is exclusively for education and training. Further, in line with its more general education policy, the e-learning facilities and training that currently exist in prisons are directed at basic level skills and are confined to supervised use of computer software, rather than access to the World Wide Web. Vocational training is clearly important for the majority of prisoners who need skills as well as support to help them to resettle on release. But at the other end of the education spectrum, learning (as opposed to training), particularly in relation to degree programmes, is at risk of being squeezed. The government's policy of focusing almost exclusively on Level 1 literacy and numeracy is restrictive, especially for long-term and life sentence inmates who frequently come to prison with high levels of education and skills.¹ The Open University has been the main provider of degree level courses in prisons for the last 30 years and typically recruits over 300 students annually. However, in the last few years, the university has moved to online delivery of its courses, and the demands of prison security make online learning fraught with difficulty. Not only does the lack of Internet access preclude degree level study, but many prisoners are not allowed to possess CD-ROMs or DVDs because the discs are considered potential weapons for assault or self-harm. Consequently, they have to make do with simulated tutorials that are loaded onto their computers, rather than the real thing.

Trials of email exchange also remain compromised. In 2006 a six-month trial took place in HMYOI Aylesbury, HMP Downview and HMP High Down, which enabled prisoners' families and friends to write to prisoners using email. The scheme, called PRIS-M, meant that emails were downloaded by prison mail room staff from a secure site on the Internet and sent directly to a printer which automatically sealed each communication for privacy before being delivered to the prison wings. While prisoners were not permitted to send emails back, their handwritten letters were scanned onto a computer, uploaded to the PRIS-M server by mail-room staff, and sent out electronically at a cost of 20 pence each. The POLARIS system currently being piloted at HMP Wormwood Scrubs, HMYOI Feltham and two other prisons, allows prisoners to access 'white sites' which have been selected and vetted by the prison service, and ongoing trials of Internet and email access at HMP Wandsworth are similarly restricted. Discussions are ongoing concerning the educational facilities that will be provided in the three planned 'Titan' prisons (each of which will house around 2,500 prisoners) and Prisons Minister David Hanson has voiced his support for giving prisoners in these facilities 'information which they would not be able to get simply from the library', though security considerations and public opinion appear to be higher priorities for the Ministry than prisoners' education (see <http://pet.netefficiency.co.uk/index.php?id=100> (accessed 18 June 2008); cf. Jewkes 2008).

A Distinctive Pain of Modern Imprisonment?

Prisoners are impoverished by their lack of technological hardware, and by their inability to exchange information in ways that have become commonplace for most of us. However, it is not simply the lack of technology that makes confinement in prison feel like a uniquely deprivational experience. Prisoners are also largely immune from the transformations of time and space that have arisen from CMCs. While most of us are acclimatised to a world where time is speeded up, slowed down, suspended, repackaged, re-ordered and re-experienced through digital and satellite technologies, most prison inmates experience time in a more traditional, chronological sense and exist through time in a much more linear fashion, almost as if in a pre-media age (Matthews 1999; Jewkes 2002). These obstacles arguably render

prisoners, especially those serving long sentences, ‘cavemen in an era of speed-of-light technology’ (Johnson 2005, p.263).

As this article will go on to discuss, the novelty and distinctiveness of denying prisoners ‘normal’ rights of communication is a moot point. However, the lack of access to information and communication technologies has been described by Johnson, following Sykes (1958), as a ‘distinctive pain of modern imprisonment’ (Johnson 2005, p.263) for the simple reason that the technological revolution that has occurred over the last two decades has expanded the social worlds of free citizens almost to the four corners of the globe, revolutionising the ways that most of us do business, shop, learn and relax. At the same time it has created a new level of disconnection between prison and society and reinvigorated debates about the totality of ‘total institutions’ (Johnson 2005; Jewkes 2008; cf. Goffman 1961). Developing this theme in a study of suicide and self-harm among young offenders, Jones (2007) found loss of stimulation, loss of social support, and loss of communication to be among the severest deprivations associated with confinement in custody in the (late) modern age.

Loss of stimulation means that boredom features heavily in a prisoner's life. In comparison with the mid-1990s, prisoners are spending more time locked in their cells and less time engaged in constructive or purposeful activities. Loss of stimulation may be particularly difficult for young people to cope with: it is estimated, for example, that at Glen Parva YOI, 30% of prisoners can be locked in their cells at any given time (HM Inspectorate of Prisons 2004). Furthermore, the Social Exclusion Unit (2002) found that in 2000, young adult prisoners aged 18–20 years, spent only 23.1 hours per week on purposeful activity. Meanwhile a MORI poll concludes that 55% of 11- to 21-year-old males in the community feel unable to be without video games on play stations or personal computers (Haste 2005), a statistic that is likely to be much higher in custodial environments. Young people have come to expect almost constant stimulation and communication, a view that may be supported by reports that the self-inflicted death of 14-year-old Adam Rickwood (the youngest person to commit suicide in British custody) in 2004 occurred the day after his television and hi-fi were removed as a punishment for smoking (see <http://tinyurl.com/68z2a3> (accessed 13 December 2008)).

Separation from family and friends is a further ‘pain’ faced by most prisoners, and is felt especially acutely by young prisoners for whom family is a vital form of support. Loss of contact with families and, in particular damaged or severed relationships with children, is a high-risk factor in suicidal behaviour and self-harm, and has been identified as one of the primary factors in recidivism. Moreover, for young men in prison, separation from loved ones is frequently voiced as their biggest concern with the most important ties being those with mothers and relationship partners (Harvey 2006). In this context, CMCs could be an immensely valuable tool for the prison service in allowing prisoners to sustain relationships with family and friends, as well as for tutors and lawyers. They would permit parents in prison to stay in touch with their children via email or social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook, and would give children and young people in custody a familiar cyber space. As it is, the disruption of family relationships and employment opportunities that even short periods of confinement can entail, creates feelings of being ‘held back’ and can act as a breeding ground for future criminality (Farrall 2008).

Relatedly, many prisoners are accommodated a long way from their family homes and consequently receive few or no visits. The finding that British Telecom charges prisoners more than five times the standard payphone rate to use a prison phone, may explain why

many prisoners are discouraged from maintaining family ties (Allison 2006). Letter writing frequently involves delays, and does not come easily to all prisoners, given that 80% of prisoners have writing skills at or below the level of an 11-year-old child (Social Exclusion Unit 2002). Giving prisoners access to the Internet and email would diminish all these problems and allow them a form of communication which, unlike letter writing, is instantaneous, interactive, and part of most young people's everyday lives. In the wider community, 91% of 16- to 21-year-olds not in education have access to mobile phones, the Internet and email with 97% having access to a computer that links to the Internet (Haste 2005). In prison, permission to write letters and use a limited number of shared payphones simply do not compensate for losing access to mobile phones and email (Jones 2007).

Interpersonal communication is of paramount importance to the ontological security and well-being of all of us and, as our collective horizons have broadened, so the knowledge and information required in order to alleviate anxiety is now global in scope. Prison inmates are no exception, but in the context of those who are preparing for release at the end of their sentence, the facilitation of communication with local external agencies may be equally important, not least in determining their desistance from crime in the future. Lack of employment opportunities, and loss of accommodation have both been identified as key factors in recidivism (Farrall 2008) and in practical terms, access to computers, email and the Internet would allow users in prison to interact with potential employers and teach them the information technology skills that many jobs now require. Prisoners could also prepare for release by being able to contact public sector organisations that offer information on their websites about issues related to housing and hostels. In addition, Internet access would provide prisons with a wider range of resources for delivering effective courses, and offer prisoners and staff opportunities for the acquisition of new skills. Over half of all male prisoners have no qualifications at all and the failure of other agencies to deal with these social problems leaves the prison service and its partners with the task of 'putting right' a lifetime of service failure. Consequently, along with strategies to address offending behaviour and reconviction rates, the teaching of basic skills has become a priority in prisons. However, only about a third of prisoners are offered access to education, and many decline it because they get paid more for doing menial work around the prison, such as cleaning the wings or picking up litter from the prison grounds. Further, the government's instrumentalist approach to prisoner education and the formal linking of basic skills to a reduction in recidivism in key performance indicators is of concern to many who believe that *lifelong* education slows the revolving door of incarceration and re-incarceration. Denying prisoners Internet access might thus be seen as an example of technology being used as a strategy of social exclusion.

Historical Perspectives

There are important historical precedents for prisoners' social isolation and characterisation as an 'undeserving' underclass who should be prevented from enjoying the privileges of communication both with each other and with those outside the prison. Whilst it is important to consider the continuities and changes in prison regimes since the creation of the modern prison, it is also significant that the focus on communication remains a central and debilitating element of the prison regime. Since the early 19th Century, prisons have been more than places of physical incarceration; they have been places of informational isolation as well. Communication, or more specifically, the prevention of communication, was a central concern that shaped penal philosophies in the 19th Century, in its different guises, from the potential of reform in the separate and silent systems to the severity of the deterrent system in the later period of the century.

The two disciplinary regimes that dominated 19th-Century prisons – the separate and silent systems – denied prisoners contact and communication with others. Limited in movement, isolated from other prisoners, forbidden from making even the smallest of gestures to a fellow inmate and effectively excommunicated from society, the Victorian prisoner was subjected to a brutal and solitary regime. Nonetheless the prison was regarded as being ‘too soft’ by sections of the media of the day (Johnston 2006), a sentiment familiar to commentators on prisons today. Communication in prison, it was thought would bring contamination: the contamination of the young, or first time, offender by hardened, habitual members of the criminal classes. Public and official discourse can be seen to ebb and flow between the optimism of the potential of the regime and the anxieties about oppression and brutality (Sparks 2007). Whilst the separate and silent systems were initially seen as optimistic in the reformatory potential they offered, anxiety in both public and official discourse grew at the reports of insanity and brutality to which prisoners were subject under such regimes. At Pentonville in the 1840s, concerns about prisoners' insanity resulted in periods of separation being reduced from 18 to twelve and then to nine months. As Ignatieff (1978) notes: ‘men came apart in the loneliness and the silence’ of separation (p.9).

In the mid-19th Century the reformatory role of the chaplain, the only person able to communicate with prisoners under the separate system, was often ridiculed by claims that they were taken in or deceived by prisoners claiming to have found redemption. A classic example of this criticism can be found in Dickens's *David Copperfield*. Copperfield visits the ‘Model Prison’ and there is introduced to the model prisoners 27 and 28 who turn out to be villains from Copperfield's past. Prisoner 27, seen through the peep-hole reading his bible, is Uriah Heap and Copperfield comments on how:

It would have been in vain to represent to such a man as the worshipful Mr Creakle [the magistrate proud of his new prison], that 27 and 28 were perfectly consistent and unchanged; that exactly what they were then, they had always been; that the hypocritical knaves were just the subjects to make that sort of profession in such a place. (Dickens 1849/50, p.699, cited in Johnston 2006, p.114)

This concern with prisoners' deception or cunning is one element underpinning current debate on the use of the Internet, mobile phones and other forms of technological communication in the 21st Century, particularly the use of technology to communicate with criminal networks or threaten and intimidate victims and witnesses.

The deterrent system that emerged from the 1850s and 1860s until the end of the century also sought to prevent communication, although any reformatory potential in such a philosophy was lost within an increasing focus on severity, through hard labour, low diet and sparse living conditions. In the second half of the century local prisons were brought under the control of the government, resulting in a stricter administration of practices and greater uniformity. Centralisation, in itself, is a marker of the importance of the control of communication. As Foucault (1977) reminds us, in bureaucratic institutions such as prisons, knowledge (and information) is power, which makes the control of communication paramount. In the later decades of the 19th and beginnings of the 20th Centuries, the State control over communication, by prisoners within the regimes, and communication with the outside world was all-embracing. Pratt (2004) notes that the 19th Century was a period in which there were competing public and official discourses about prisons; after the Gladstone Committee in 1895, there were no formal inquiries for half a century, official prison discourse had the ‘power to control knowledge, be able to proclaim that all was as it should

be in prisons' (p.79). The government could more easily dismiss claims of brutality or repression by simply stating that these practices did not occur any more (Pratt 2004). Of course, there were voices of resistance from those whose experiences or political standpoints enabled them to document their imprisonment or gain attention for wider political strategies, for example, suffragettes, Irish republicans, conscientious objectors, or gentlemen prisoners. There were plenty of scandals, but they were not of 'sufficient weight to disturb the equilibrium of the prison establishment' (Pratt 2004, p.86).

Prevention of communication prevailed as a disciplinary strategy and it was not until the 1920s and 1930s that any significant changes were made to regimes experienced by those held in convict and local prisons. Hobhouse's and Brockway's (1922) report *English Prisons Today*, published in 1922, argued that: 'the most manifestly dehumanising prison rule [was] that which demands silence on the part of prisoners' (p.355). Although they acknowledged that most prisoners made no attempt to observe the rule of silence, they thought the strain was severe and the effects serious. For example, they present evidence of prisoners who suffered from speech impediments, stutters and tied tongue when returning to conditions of unrestricted speech. One prisoner is quoted as saying:

I expect that they will order my tongue to be cut next. As it is I am in a deaf and dumb party, not a word uttered from morning to night. This is a beautiful silent system. I am training for a Trappist Monk. (Hobhouse and Brockway 1922, p.564)

Other critics of the system believed that the silence rule encouraged cunning and deceitfulness as prisoners devised ways in which to communicate with each other. One lifer claimed: 'the silence rule encourages such a practice of deception that men grow artful and lying as a matter of course; even the most innocent man becomes crafty. It is simply a matter of self-protection' (Hobhouse and Brockway 1922, p.565). Once again, these sentiments have parallels in contemporary discussions. For example, it is believed that thousands of mobile phones are brought into prison (via prison officers, authorised visitors, or simply by lobbing them over perimeter fences into prison grounds). At one prison alone – HMP Wandsworth – just under 250 mobile phones were found in the first five months of 2007 and the independent monitoring board (IMB) has highlighted the 'apparently limitless' supply of mobile phones smuggled into Britain's prisons (*The Daily Telegraph*, 26 May 2008).

Hobhouse and Brockway (1922) believed that the rule of silence had grave consequences, and many prisoners attested to the deep psychological effects of enforced silence. Ex-prisoners provided evidence of individual inmates who, under the regime 'had become like an idiot' or, after punishment for talking, were so afraid to speak that they 'came out of prison at the end of the sentence ... with his mind an absolute blank' (p.563). The debilitating effects of the prevention of communication also impacted on prisoners' ability to socialise later in life, the potential for employment on release and reinforced the criminal as 'anti-social' or 'other', lacking in the skills to communicate in wider society. These findings have parallels in recent research on in-cell television, in which several prisoners observed that vulnerable, fragile or 'anti-social' inmates had become invisible as they stayed behind their cell doors watching television (Jewkes 2002). Many prisoners reflected that criminal activity itself is often the result of poor socialisation skills, and that it was often those inmates who were least able to engage in social intercourse who were most likely to turn on their TV sets and 'tune out' of the prison culture (Jewkes 2002).

By the second decade of the 20th Century, some amelioration in prison practices, including the relaxation of the rules on communication were introduced. In 1921, visiting boxes were removed and spouses and relatives were allowed to embrace prisoners. From 1922 conversation was allowed in prison workshops and from 1923 the system of separation was suspended in convict prisons and eradicated in 1930. However, separation was not abolished for the mainstay of the prison population, that is, those held in local prisons, until 1931 (Forsythe 1990). Even after these changes, there were still concerns. During a mutiny at Dartmoor prison in 1932 approximately 150 prisoners seized control of the establishment for an hour-and-a-half, fires were started in central offices and record rooms, and extensive damage was caused before prison officers and police reinforcements retook the prison (Brown 2007). At least some of the claims explaining the mutiny linked this event to the move to association among prisoners, and the creation of an inmate community, able to communicate and to organise (Thomas 1972). Despite this incident, further concessions to communication were made, and during the 1930s, the prison newspaper emerged (restricted as it was) and prisoners were allowed wirelesses for the first time – although personal radio sets were not permitted until 1974 (Soothill 2007).

Back to the Future

The reasons why politicians and policy makers in 21st-Century Britain have been slow to acknowledge the benefits to prisoners of giving them relatively unrestricted access to CMCs are complex, but the justification most frequently voiced is quite straightforward. Political justifications for denying prisoners Internet access are founded on perceptions of the technology's inherent insecurity: a rationalisation that is difficult to counter within a system of governance characterised by audit, accountability and assessments of risk. But there are two ironies underpinning debates about the potential security breaches that could arise from permitting new communications technologies in prisons. First, it is entirely plausible that the consequences of not allowing prisoners access to online education, information and entertainment are considerably greater than the potential security threats posed by any individual prisoner; certainly, a technologically illiterate prisoner population cannot be regarded as desirable in a fast-moving and technologically-advanced society (Jewkes 2008). That this truth tends to be subsumed by the overriding view that the more humane prison regimes become, the less effective they are as a deterrent, obscures the real paradox of prisons, which is that they are places of human(e) aspiration and well-meaning social experimentation, as well as sites of struggle, abuse and neglect (Sparks 2007).

The second irony is that, if and when prisoners are permitted routinely to access the Net, the technology that promises so much freedom is likely to be implemented by the authorities in ways that enhance security and surveillance. Control takes many forms, including the seemingly benign, and computer technologies will undoubtedly follow in-cell TV as a means of managing prisoners' inclusion and exclusion both from certain spaces at certain times and from certain levels of 'privileges'. Johnson (2005) notes that, in the US, prison visits, telephone calls, work release programmes, compassionate leaves, permission to decorate cells and keep pets, facilities to cook one's own food, and permission to receive personal property and wear civilian clothes, have all been eroded in prisons where the one 'perk' allowed is access to television. A similar pattern of social and behavioural control has been observed in the UK where the introduction of media resources into prisons appears to be reproducing disadvantage and deprivation (Jewkes 2002). Earlier lock-up times have been introduced, education opportunities have been curtailed and spaces for inmates to interact with others have been restricted. With respect to in-cell TV, it is difficult to avoid the Foucauldian

conclusion that personal media have one great, unspoken advantage as far as prison authorities are concerned, and that is to normalise the regulation and surveillance of inmates (Jewkes 2002).

Conclusion

In 2008 the prison system allows most prisoners to share with the wider society the 'privileges' of traditional forms of communication including letter-writing, (restricted use of) telephones, television, radio, newspapers and magazines. These media give governors and other prison staff a raft of effective penalties for relatively minor transgressions including withholding visits, prohibiting prisoners from making telephone calls, and confiscating in-cell television sets. The 'carrot-and-stick' mentality that underlies most forms of communication within prison causes many prisoners to be ambivalent about them, and there is widespread resentment among the inmate population that technology in prisons tends to be used for purposes of control and punishment, rather than reform or rehabilitation. The control and curtailment of interpersonal communication continues to underpin solitary confinement, usually regarded as the severest form of non-capital punishment in the West. Exemplified in the United States by the 'supermax', prisoners at some of these institutions are completely isolated, not just from fellow prisoners, but also from staff who remain behind physical barriers. In these establishments, prisoners do everything in isolation including exercising in 'dog runs' (King 2008).

At the beginning of the 21st Century, then, prisons are still falling back on 19th-Century notions of punishment. The authorities' management of communication remains central to penal philosophy. Fundamental ways of controlling and ordering prisoners rely on knowledge about them: officers listening to what is going on, segregating those whose communications have become uncontrollable – drug dealers, those in debt or fear, or those charged with terrorism – separating them, isolating them and using the prevention of communication to regulate and monitor the prison population. The origins of these regimes in the separate and silent systems, and persistence of the rule of silence in prisons of the 19th and early 20th Centuries facilitated control and order. Proposals to allow association brought fears of contamination, organisation among prisoners and the potential for manipulation, yet as one governor observed: 'the privilege of talking is like the privilege of seeing – a human right' (Hobhouse and Brockway 1922, p.570). The fear of communication manifested itself in the severity of prison regimes within these historical examples but this fear is perpetuated within current observation on media technologies in prison. Framing prisoners' rights to use the Internet as a security matter makes the policy of denial intelligible, but it obscures the reality, which is that in contemporary penal philosophy, segregation, separation and silence remain the severest penalties.²

Notes

1. While the low levels of literacy and numeracy that blight the prison population are inarguably a source of shame to UK society, when broken down into different kinds of establishments, a more nuanced picture emerges. For example, according to Home Office evidence, 37% of female prisoners have participated in further education, while research indicates that at one Category D prison in England, 69% of prisoners had achieved GCSE O Level grades or above prior to imprisonment; 29% had A Levels, and 31% had a degree and/or postgraduate qualifications (Hayward 2006).

2. 2 This article develops a paper presented at the 'Justice, Media and Public: Comparative and Historical Perspectives' conference at Keele University, 28 February 2008.

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