Chapter 11

Restricted Communication: Social Relationships and the Media Use of Prisoners

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to point out the patterns of media use of an inmate before the incarceration and the communication habits, as well as the compulsorily restricted media use during imprisonment. The purpose is to get insight of how the prisoners deal with the change of their situation and the subsequent use of traditional media such as letters and phone calls in order to keep in touch with their family and other social contacts. Deriving from the media repertoire approach, the research question is focused on the media use before and during imprisonment, which should clarify the change of patterns. In order to conduct a detailed exploration of a media repertoire on the personal level, the data collection has been conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews with female prisoners from the German female prison TAF (Teilanstalt für Frauen) at the JVA Billwerder.

INTRODUCTION

Digital change is an everyday challenge for individuals, but also for society. Every part of modern life is somehow connected online. Humanity relies heavily on contiguous technological improvements and digital success. Even addiction to the Internet has become a growing issue in society and research (Griffiths, 2016). In Germany 88% of
the population has access to the Internet (Internet Live Stats, 2016). However, what about the part of society who is excluded from the Internet? What about prisoners whose media consumption is regulated by institutions and by the state?

Media develops exponentially quickly and change evolves in an ongoing process. Prisons regulations on the other hand are rigid and fixed. Long ago, our society decided what the correct manner of punishment must look like, as the French philosopher Michel Foucault claimed in 1977. These theories of punishment and rehabilitation have changed over time, yet media access in penal institutions still is appears rather old fashioned. In times of social media as an important factor of the maintenance of social relationships, incarceration means not only a big cut in the lives of prisoners, but also for their communication as a means of social sustenance and contact outside prison. This research sheds light on the understudied field of media use and incarceration in women’s prisons in Germany. The aim is to get insight on the process of change in an individual in terms of media use at the time of imprisonment. The interest lies in the manner of communication, such as the media use of an inmate in order to sustain their respective social relationships. Therefore, the following research questions are guiding throughout this research:

- **RQ1**: How are the patterns of media use of an individual changing in the case of imprisonment?
- **RQ2**: How does the change of the media repertoire affect the social relationships of a female prisoner?
- **Sub RQ**: What role does the lack of social media play in the shift of the communicative figurations?

Since the nature of the topic of this study poses some ethical considerations a basic premise must be outlined here. “Do offender perceptions really matter? Clearly, some would argue that they don’t, maintaining that it is for society rather than criminals to determine the purpose or meaning of punishment” (Van Voorhis, 1997, p. 139).

This study looks at the prisoner as an important individual which is part of our society, and therefore needs to be reintegrated after incarceration. This reintegration makes it relevant for the society who demands punishment, as well to give them a chance to regain respect and prove that they deserve a second chance. Therefore, offender perceptions matter as they help us to understand the situation from the point of view of a prisoner. The everyday, but also long term, needs of prisoners are taken seriously and therefore this study is interested in their perceptions in order to ascertain a better understanding for society at large, but also with regards to the rehabilitation process as a whole.
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