Prisoner radio as an abolitionist tool: a scholactivist reflection.

Prisoner and prison radio - audio production and broadcasting that services prisoner and prison communities - has existed in a variety of forms in both the Global South and North for over thirty years. It has recently seen a surge in popularity and awareness in the mainstream public sphere (Anderson & Bedford 2017a). Some prisoner radio programs broadcast to the general public from inside of prison, via community radio, podcasting or other digital transmissions. Others are produced 'on the outside' by the formerly imprisoned and/or their allies. Alternatively, radio production might occur 'behind the walls' with the outcomes limited to an incarcerated audience, perhaps nationally or specific to the location. Content varies from 'shout-outs', song requests and dedications, to commentary, news, current affairs and documentary.

This diverse genre's unifying factor is the engagement of prisoner communities in its production, be this prisoners, former prisoners, their friends and family, social justice activists and organisations and/or government representatives, as well as radio broadcasters and stations. The value of prisoner radio is as diverse as its formats. It assists to overcome alienation and isolation; provides formal and informal training and education pathways; broadens public discourse on criminal justice issues; and encourages active citizenship through the very act of media production (on the benefits of prisoner radio see, for example, Anderson 2008, 2012, 2013; Anderson and Bedford 2017b, 2019; Bedford 2014, 2016, 2018; Doliwa, 2013; Fisher, 2009; Gosztonyi, 2018; Grimes and Stevenson, 2012; Minc, Butler and Gahan, 2007).

Prisoner radio is often low-key in nature, targeted towards a niche audience. However, recently there has been increased awareness of prisoner radio, in both mainstream media and the general public, which may be attributed to the high-profile success of certain programs and stations. For example, the American podcast, *Ear Hustle*, produced at San Quentin State Prison, was named a finalist for a 2020 Pulitzer Prize in audio reporting and, by 2019, reported 20 million downloads (Rodriguez 2018). In the UK, The Prison Radio Association (discussed below) was recognised as Charity of the Year at the 2016 Third Sector Awards, and consistently wins

prestigious radio awards. In the country now referred to as Australia, where the authors are situated, prisoner radio was showcased at the 2018 Community Broadcasters Association of Australia's national conference and, in 2020, a podcast series about life for women at the Darwin Correctional Centre, *Birds Eye View*, received extensive and positive mainstream media coverage following its launch on International Women's Day and, in November, won the Australian Podcast Awards 'Best Podcast of the Year'.

The prison abolition movement has also recently gained increased momentum and visibility. Prison abolition is a political vision that aims to replace traditional understandings of incarceration and policing with alternatives based on "undoing the society that continues to feed on and maintain the oppression of masses of people through punishment, violence, and control" (Gilmore in Paiella: n.p.). The line between abolition and reform (which focuses on improving systems rather than eliminating them) is not definitive (Heiner 2003), and as Angela Davis in Davis & Rodriguez (2000: 216) makes clear:

The most difficult question for advocates of prison abolition is how to establish a balance between reforms that are clearly necessary to safeguard the lives of prisoners and those strategies designed to promote the eventual abolition of prisons as the dominant mode of punishment. In other words, I do not think that there is a strict dividing line between reform and abolition.

Brown (2020:75) points out that, while abolition has a long historical presence as an intervention of struggle against colonialism and slavery, continual (and recently, more publicised) incursions by the criminal justice system 'have led to greater visibility of alternative possibilities'. The global and growing Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has introduced an abolitionist discourse to the mainstream vernacular. For example, recently in the United States, the New York City Council voted to close Rikers Island by 2026 in response to community campaigning driven by an abolition agenda. In Australia, the BLM movement has been most commonly articulated through the ongoing fight against black deaths in custody. Tens of thousands of people marched through Australian cities and towns for Black Lives Matter protests in early June, 2020. Oxley (2020: n.pag.) points out:

defunding the police, prison abolition and dismantling the systems that created and continue the ongoing oppression, violence, discrimination and the ‘othering’ of this country’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, is not a radical idea.

One final term needs to be defined before moving forward. We use the term ‘prison-industrial complex’ (PIC) to refer to correctional centres and staff, along with the government departments (including legislation, policies and procedures) that oversee the incarceration of human beings – ‘a set of bureaucratic, political, and economic interests that encourage increased spending on imprisonment, regardless of the actual need’ (Schlosser 1998: n.pag.). While the term is often associated with the United States, Jarldorn (2019: 328-9) reminds us one of its earliest renditions ‘saw Britain use Australia as a solution to their overcrowded prisons, to stake a claim for strategic land and to build a colony on the backs of convict labor’, with ongoing devastating impacts for First Nations people.

This article juxtaposes prisoner radio and the prison abolition movement, both in comparison and contrast. The relationships between prisoner radio broadcasters/audiences and the State – embodied through the prison-industrial complex - are often complicated. Such complexities can impact on prisoner radio’s capacity to act as an agent of change as its practitioners negotiate the contested spaces of reform and abolition. To develop this discussion, we employ a critical autoethnographic approach that foregrounds our scholactivist position (Petrina 2012). We reflect on our experiences as prisoner radio practitioners and researchers to consider and discuss the potentials for prisoner radio to either support, or hinder, a prison abolition agenda. Can the genre contribute to the prison abolition movement when it often requires the support of the PIC to exist?

Methodology

We apply critical autoethnography as our methodological approach. Holman Jones (2018: 4) defines critical autoethnography as the ‘study and critique of culture through the lens of the self ‘that merges the practices of autobiography and ethnography to provide ‘nuanced, complex, and specific insights into particular human lives, experiences, and relationships’ (Holman Jones 2018: 5). Such an

approach simultaneously turns the ethnographic gaze inwards towards the self and outwards towards ‘the larger context wherein self-experiences occur’ (Denzin, 1997: 227), to encourage both personal and cultural critique (Boylorn & Orbe 2014). Self-reflexivity is a key component of the critical autoethnographic process. It is not a method *per se*, but rather a critical ethos that cannot be confined to one element of the research process (May & Perry 2018).

We also take a ‘scholactivist’ approach to our overall program of research. Petrina (2012) claims to have coined the term ‘scholactivism’ as a reference to scholar-activism, though they write little more about its origins. According to Ramsey (2018:1), it is a wordplay on the medieval term ‘scholasticism’, which refers to ‘dogmatic and narrow-minded insistence on tradition-bound tasks of academic adjudication’. In contrast, the key impetus behind scholactivism is that ‘creators of knowledge ... intentionally embrace the reality that their work can lead to social change’ (Farnum 2016: n.pag.). That activist-scholars ‘are passionate, engaged, and participate in social justice movement activities does not bias or invalidate their observations and analysis of an inquiry’ (Van Der Meer 2019: 353). As Russell (2015: 225) articulates:

The question must thus be rethought as which side do you choose to take; do you choose to reproduce the dominant way of seeing/knowing? Or do you choose to align with an antagonistic perspective that knows the world differently?

To begin our discussion, we consider our research journeys thus far. It is important to approach self-reflexivity as an iterative and cyclical practice (Pillow 2013), which includes considering our current practice as an extension of what has preceded it. While earlier iterations of our prisoner radio research and practice were not explicitly designed within an abolitionist framework, it is possible to consider its outcomes through an abolitionist lens. This paper acts as a ‘press pause’ moment, where we reflect upon a series of prisoner radio projects that we have either joined or assisted to establish over the past fifteen years. We then draw on this practice of critical-reflection to discuss the potentials for prisoner radio to either support, or hinder, prison abolition, through three case study examples.

Discussion

Contextual background

An autoethnographic approach limits our reflections to consider only those radio shows and stations with which we have direct experience. This also aligns with our scholactivist approach to research, which aims to avoid ‘armchair scholarship’ (Hogan 2018: 84) and instead focus on narratives and theorisations of practical engagement (Ramsey 2018). As such, before we discuss the relationships between prisoner radio and the prison abolition movement, it is prudent to outline our experiences as prisoner radio practitioners and scholars. Since 2015, we have collaborated on a variety of research projects, based in South Australia – a somewhat inevitable outcome considering we have two of the only (if not *the* only) doctorates on prison(er) radio research (at the time of writing).

Anderson began her direct involvement with prisoner radio at the start of her PhD candidature in 2004, with the prisoner request show *Locked In* on community radio station 4ZZZ (Meanjin/Brisbane, Queensland, Australia) – a case study in her research, described below). Before the commencement of her PhD, Anderson had never been officially connected to *Locked In*, or its predecessor, *The Prisoners’ Show*. She had, however, volunteered at the radio station, contributed many news stories and documentaries for broadcast to the show and acted as a ‘back-up’ announcer for regular presenters. Participating directly in *Locked In* during her candidature allowed for rich data to be gathered, and, more importantly, developed a thorough understanding of the genre itself. This was her first experience working directly with former prisoners and their families, which both challenged and broadened her understandings of criminal justice, as she learned from those directly affected by the PIC. Anderson continued to volunteer for *Locked In* for ten years, well beyond the parameters of her PhD research, until relocating to Tarntanya/Adelaide, South Australia, in 2014.

Within the same timeframe, Bedford’s involvement in England began in 2005, as a media trainer developing and delivering audio production workshops in prisons. As part of a regional partnership with the BBC, Prison Service, Probation Service, voluntary sector and education providers, the project led to the formal establishment

of not-for-profit organisation, the Prison Radio Association (PRA). As a founding member, she supported the development of the world's first national prison radio service, National Prison Radio, before a move to Tarntanya/Adelaide, South Australia in 2008. Immersing herself in the Australian community media sector, she observed the relationship between radio and prisons within a dramatically different setting and focused her PhD research on examining the unique context of the PRA story to understand the possibilities for adapting future models.

In 2015-16, we (Anderson and Bedford) collaborated on our first research project, working with the Tarntanya/Adelaide grassroots organisation, Seeds of Affinity Pathways for Women. 'Seeds' (as it is more colloquially known) is a grassroots, not-for-profit, self-funded organisation, comprised mostly of women of lived prison experience¹, that advocates on behalf of women in South Australian prisons and supports them post-release. Our pilot project, 'What I Know Now'², investigated how radio production might be useful as a tool to support women of lived prison experience. It produced a series of audio segments and a live broadcast, that led to an ongoing monthly community radio show, *Radio Seeds*³, that is produced and presented by Seeds of Affinity with minimal support from Bedford (see Anderson & Bedford [2017b, 2019]).

We developed a *Radio Seeds* program of research, continuing to investigate the benefits of radio production for women of lived prison experience. Between 2016 and 2018, the Department of Correctional Services South Australia (DCS-SA) granted permission for a *Radio Seeds* team (comprising the researchers and a former prisoner/now broadcaster) access to Adelaide Women's Prison, to host 'Listening Clubs' for the *Radio Seeds* content, and interview incarcerated women on a variety of topics for inclusion in the radio show broadcasts.

¹ The phrase 'women of lived prison experience' is the preferred term used by Seeds of Affinity to describe its membership. Many people have had experiences with the criminal justice system (including the authors through their work in prisons). To have 'lived prison experience' means to have been affected first-hand, or to be directly impacted through incarceration or other limitations on one's freedom.

² <https://radioseeds.wordpress.com/category/what-i-know-now/>

³ <https://radioseeds.wordpress.com/>

At a similar time, Bedford was approached by a Recreation Officer at Mobilong (men's) Prison, also in South Australia, who was interested in establishing a prison radio station, similar to National Prison Radio in the UK. With support from a DCS-SA Community Grant, we conducted an action research pilot project in 2017, to investigate the potential of prison radio to improve the wellbeing of prisoners and promote a more productive and positive prison environment (see Anderson and Bedford 2017c). The pilot involved a series of radio production workshops that culminated in a CD to assist new prisoners through their induction period at Mobilong, covering topics important to the settling-in process in prison, as identified by the workshop participants. In 2018, a similar action research was conducted in Adelaide Women's Prison, also funded by a DCS-SA Community Grant.

At the time of writing (2020), Anderson is based in Meanjin/Brisbane, Queensland and is working with the Kunga Stopping Violence Program (KSVP) in Mparntwe/Alice Springs, Northern Territory, to evaluate its prison through-care program and investigate how audio production can enhance both KSVP's work, and the evaluation process itself. Bedford is in Tarntanya/Adelaide and continues to support *Radio Seeds*. We have also established the Prisoner Radio Network⁴ to connect and support prisoner radio initiatives across Australia. Taking direction from Holman Jones (2018: 5), we aim to encourage two key actions, in ourselves and the readers of our work; that is, to scrutinise institutions, discourses and systems that privilege some and marginalise others, and, as a result, to put theory into action. This is not an 'anti-intellectual position ... (r)ather, it means thinking and writing unapologetically to contribute to the toolboxes and fuel supplies of actual struggles against racism, imperialism and colonialism' (Choudry 2020: 29). In the next section, we draw on our experiences as prisoner radio practitioners and scholactivists to consider the relationships between prisoner radio, prison reform and prison abolition, drawing on three case study examples.

Making radio on the inside

⁴ <https://prisonerradio.org/>

To produce audio and radio directly with prisoners requires the cooperation of the PIC. There are various prison and prisoner radio projects successfully operating inside of correctional facilities, the former distinguished as broadcasts limited to an incarcerated audience. The Prison Radio Association's National Prison Radio, in the United Kingdom, is one such example⁵.

National Prison Radio (NPR) is the first national network of its kind, producing radio made by and with prisoners, exclusively for a prison audience. The service is designed to support prisoners through their sentences and aims to reduce reoffending by providing information and support in preparation for release. Content from multiple prisons is collated, produced and scheduled for broadcast through NPR headquarters based at Her Majesty's Prison (HMP) Brixton in London. Reaching a potential audience of around 80,000 people inside over 100 prisons across England and Wales, listeners can tune in to 24 hour-a-day music and speech programming through a designated in-cell television channel.

The Prison Radio Association (PRA) is an award-winning independent not-for-profit media organisation. Established in 2006, initially to network and support individual radio stations in prisons across the UK, the PRA launched NPR within three years and continues to manage the service independently (for more background on the PRA story, see Bedford 2018). Over a decade later, NPR has become an intrinsic part of prison operations, transforming communications and increasing prisoner access to services and information. Developed in partnership with the Ministry of Justice, broadcast throughout the prison estate, and facilitated through a dedicated Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) Head of Prison Radio seconded from the BBC, NPR irrefutably exists to support a prison management agenda. From a prison perspective, radio offers a relatively low-cost and effective means of informing and entertaining a prison population often locked in their cells for over 20 hours a day.

Equally, however, the PRA's commitment to running a service by, for, and alongside people in prison, prioritises prisoner agency and participation. This aim brings a

⁵ For further information on National Prison Radio see Bedford (2018).

social justice focus on prisoner rights and representation into play, empowering an underrepresented and marginalised group with a voice. The independent role of the PRA is crucial, building relationships over time to balance the contradictory needs of different stakeholders and functioning as an intermediary between prisoner, institution and State. For the PRA, the key to this position is a continued focus on making impactful radio by using the professional media practice and editorial frameworks involved in running any radio station.

As with any media service, the success of NPR relies on the ability to engage, represent and remain credible with the target audience - far from being 'a captive audience', prisoners have the power to turn off at any time. Prisoner participation in NPR programming is critical for engaging listeners and encouraging ownership and investment in the service. The program schedule is updated regularly in response to listener feedback and building on the skills and specialist music knowledge of the prisoner producers working in the team at any point. Regular shows include *Sound Women*, the HMP Styal take on the longstanding BBC Radio Four *Woman's Hour*, and *Outside In*, providing practical advice and support for people coming to the end of their sentences. This is combined with regular social action campaigns, such as a series of short promotional features on drug and alcohol awareness, a one-day focus on smoking, and a month-long campaign about learning to read while in prison. Reflecting on the impact of NPR during his time in prison, Gareth Evans explains that writing in to the *Rock Show* helped him to make connections and find humanity inside,

[NPR] came, too, with advice about prison life that genuinely helped: what to do if you want to sort your addiction out; what happens if things are getting on top of you; and, stories of people who had come through it. It never let me forget about what I had to do, but it made me feel like there were so many more reasons to do it than I had first thought (Evans in Bedford 2018: vi).

Producing programming that focuses on improving lives inside and preparing for life on the outside is a reformist venture, rather than one that furthers an explicitly abolitionist agenda. Yet the existence of a prisoner-led radio service is a significant step on a longer pathway to dismantling structures of incarceration. When run independently, by and for people with lived prison experience, radio is a powerful

means of opening up the conversation about the strategies that work, demystifying the prison experience, and raising awareness about the realities of prison life.

Such work is central to the development of decarceration strategies, able to raise awareness and support for the more restorative, community-based solutions proven to be more effective for reducing reoffending. In what has become a manifesto for prison abolition, Angela Davis stresses the need to disarticulate the conceptual link between crime and punishment in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of the social role of punishment (2003). The challenges faced by criminal justice practitioners and activists are uniquely complicated in the era of the PIC. Davis argues that the traditional rhetoric of reform serves to strengthen an unworkable and unfair system. Yet equally, it is important to acknowledge the efforts of those working from within the system to create a more humane and habitable environment. The major challenge lies in balancing the need to improve conditions for the people in prison, without bolstering the permanence of the prison system (Davis 2003: 102).

Making radio on the outside

At the other end of the prisoner radio spectrum, there are shows (almost exclusively broadcast on community and public radio) that operate completely separate from the PIC. These are packaged as either ‘shout-out’/request shows or magazine style programs with a radical/left wing perspective on criminal justice issues. Here we draw on experiences with two Australian community radio shows representative of each format - *Locked In* and *Radio Seeds*.

*Locked In*⁶ is a two-hour weekly program on 4ZZZ (Meanjin/Brisbane) that mostly broadcasts music requests (from prisoners, family and friends), and prisoners’ letters. It was established circa 1986 (then known as *The Prisoners’ Show*), by a group of 4ZZZ volunteers, after they served jail sentences for anti-nuclear protesting. Since then, the show has been coordinated and hosted by various people of lived prison experience, friends and family of prisoners as well as other advocates for prisoner rights. Broadcasting on a left-leaning, often ‘radical’ community radio station and free of interference from the PIC, *Locked In* could be easily perceived as an ideal avenue

⁶ For further information on *Locked In* see Anderson (2012).

through which to pursue an abolitionist agenda. Indeed, the program has been a platform to abolitionist news and views throughout its existence and 4ZZZ has a long history of supporting prisoners and prison justice activism:

For some prisoners the show means an awful lot, psychologically ... the rebelliousness of 4ZZZ is important for keeping people's spirits up — the power of being able to say what they want in their letters that are read over the air, through [circumventing] the prison censors, is really important to prisoners (Tracey in Williams 2000: 56).

We must recognise our own abolitionist agenda does not necessarily extend to the prisoner communities we work alongside, which do not comprise a singular hegemonic group. Our program of research revolves around investigations of how audio production can support the lives of people with lived prison experience. While that incorporates abolitionist goals, it does not exclude activities and outcomes that encourage and/or focus on reform. *Locked In* is an interesting case in point, because the focus of the show is not necessarily always explicitly radical or abolitionist in nature. Anderson (2013) found that *Locked In* program presenters cited different reasons for their involvement in the program, and while this included promoting social justice and contributing alternative discourses about prison issues, some presenters emphasised maintaining connection with prisoners and providing humour and camaraderie. More significantly, *Locked In* is a program that relies heavily on its prisoner audience to provide much of its content and direction. While the show does include news and information, this is secondary to prisoners' letters and phone calls from friends and families.

Since the late 2000s, the *Locked In* narrative has been dominated by prisoners' letters and requests, a change that coincided with an increase in volunteers who had experienced incarceration themselves. This is significant because, while prisoners may feel powerless when agitating against the dominant culture or outside world, they may maintain some sense of power within the context of their own public sphere. Furthermore, privileging the voices of prisoners' voices in the public sphere is, in itself, a radical move when we consider the multiple ways in which the PIC silences the incarcerated.

It should be noted that content need not be explicitly political to expose listeners to alternative criminal justice discourses. Such constructions come not only from information, but also from the perspectives that are generated through the personalisation fostered when people tell their own stories, in their own voices. Prisoner request shows can certainly be very humanising in this sense. Prisoners, their families and friends discuss exceptionally private topics through a completely public medium. There are many examples from *Locked In* where abstract issues, such as waiting for parole or parenting from prison, become directly connected to individuals. This was encapsulated by a first time listener to *Locked In* who emailed the program:

In essence, *Locked In* humanises people in jail. (It's) no easy task to remind the greater community that prisoners are Mothers, Fathers, Sons, Daughters, Brothers and Sisters to people everywhere, in all walks of life, when many people would prefer to think of them as persona non grata (personal correspondence).

That being said, this population is not homogenous and their messages are not always abolitionist or even reformist in nature. This is particularly the case when it comes to discussions about people convicted for offences against children, or who are housed in protective custody.

*Radio Seeds*⁷, on the other hand, is more aligned to an abolitionist agenda. The monthly, one hour radio program broadcasts on WOW-FM (Tarntanya/Adelaide, South Australia) and is coordinated and hosted by women of lived prison experience as part of Seeds of Affinity Pathways for Women (discussed above). It is a magazine style show made up of discussions, interviews and pre-recorded content (mostly event coverage via vox pops) - focusing on prison and criminal justice issues - wrapped around music selected by the *Radio Seeds* hosts.

Because the narrative of *Radio Seeds* is controlled by the hosts (rather than directed by the content of prisoners' letters), it applies a more critical lens to criminal justice issues as radio presenters interrogate each other's understandings of a wide variety of issues on-air, such as home detention, overcrowding, and the power of education.

⁷ For further information on *Radio Seeds* see Anderson & Bedford (2019).

Combined with a wide range of interviews with representatives from (for example) support organizations and activism campaigns, these discussions encourage a high level of constructive reflexivity on the impact of the criminal justice system. *Radio Seeds* has also explicitly challenged the PIC's expansionist agenda in its content, including coverage of the 'No Gatton Prison' campaign against the building of a new privately-run prison in Queensland, discussions on the problems of privatization, and a documentary *Radio Seeds* produced at a Sisters Inside 'Imagining Abolition' conference.

The program's authenticity derives from the hosts being almost exclusively women of lived prison experience who volunteer with *Seeds* to support others who have been affected by the criminal justice system. New members of the organisation are afforded the opportunity to participate in the radio show, either directly or as interviewed talent. Furthermore, the program has previously been granted access to record at the Adelaide Women's Prison, which provided the opportunity to broadcast incarcerated voices (albeit only those approved by the PIC). A review by the authors published in 2019 found *Radio Seeds* featured voices of incarcerated women in the majority of its episodes (Anderson and Bedford 2019).

Fortuitous for prisoner communities in the Tarntanya/Adelaide region, there is also a prisoner request show broadcasting at another community radio station in the city. This has 'freed up' *Radio Seeds* to focus on criminal justice and prison rights issues, while *The Prison Show* at ThreeD Radio plays requests and reads letters in a similar style to *Locked In*.

Prisoner radio as an abolitionist tool

Whether or not prisoner radio is produced inside or outside of prison, the relationship between the prison-industrial complex and prisoner radio communities is complicated, to say the least. This can have a significant impact on prisoner radio's capacity to act as an agent of change, whether that be abolitionist or reformist in nature. The people and organisations that comprise prisoner radio communities are significantly broad, and include both audiences and broadcasters, who often are one and the same. A prisoner radio station, program or project may involve prisoners

and/or former prisoners, their friends and family, social justice activists and organisations, radio broadcasters and community stations. At times, representatives of the PIC, such as prison staff and government department representatives, are also directly involved in the production of prisoner radio. The varying degrees of power between these groups impacts the capacity for prisoner radio to flourish, both inside and outside prison confines.

We include ourselves, action research scholactivists, as members of the prisoner radio community and it is an imperative to recognise our position of power and privilege within that community. An important aspect of autoethnography is ‘critical reflection upon the effects of hegemonic power structures even, and especially when, we may be the arbiters of such structures’ (Spry 2016: 37). It is an inescapable fact that, even within a participatory action research framework, researchers hold unequal power over the research agenda, having control of, for example, the management of funds and administration of ethics approval processes. Furthermore, when working with the incarcerated, we have the luxury of leaving the prison at the end of the day, and as white women, are less likely to face the risk of imprisonment (Australian Law Reform Commission 2017). As Ramsey (2018: 1) points out, ‘the will to change the world does not mean the abandonment of one’s current position’ within it.

As highlighted above, it is important that we, as researchers in a position of privilege and power, do not place such an emphasis on an abolitionist agenda so as to exclude or discourage people of lived prison experience to engage in prisoner radio production. According to Huq & Best (2018: 283), ‘(i)n a neoliberalized political sphere, where there’s a clear separation between citizens and oligarchs, scholactivists demand a more egalitarian public sphere where participation is open to anyone regardless of socio-economic status or political ideology’. Prisoner radio should support the voice of the most marginalised members of prison communities – the incarcerated.

National Prison Radio, while intrinsically linked to the PIC, operates as a prisoner-led radio service; embedded in prison reformism rather than abolition, its achievements are still central to the development of decarceration strategies, as it raises awareness and support for restorative and community based solutions proven to be more

effective for reducing reoffending. Prisoner programs that broadcast on community radio independent of the PIC, have the potential to promote an abolitionist agenda, however, this is highly dependent on the political outlook of the radio hosts, and how closely they control the narrative of the radio show. Prisoner request shows' content, while not explicitly radical or abolitionist, personalise an often-demonised population and foreground alternative discourses on crime and punishment more broadly.

As Bedford (2018: 171) reminds us

(p)oliticians, corporations, and mass media all have a vested interest in perpetuating the notion that crime is out of control, ensuring a steady supply of prisoners in order to justify and strengthen the growth of the prison industrial complex. As such, the dominant prison discourse obscures the understanding of the personal and social effects of prison expansion, and blocks debate about prison alternatives.

We argue that prisoner radio, in all its formats, is a powerful means of dismantling these blocks on debate to open up the conversation about strategies that work towards decarceration; demystifying the prison experience, and raising awareness about the realities of prison life. These actions are core to an abolitionist agenda.

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