

On what it means to be free: Radio as a tool of desistance for formerly incarcerated women in Adelaide, Australia

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Abstract

Women and girls make up only a small percentage of the overall prison population; however, there has been a significant increase in their representation, most notably over the past twenty years. Despite this, fundamental understandings of the role of prisons, as well as issues around recidivism and desistance are based on a male norm, failing to meet the needs of women affected by the criminal justice system. This article outlines the findings from an ongoing grassroots action research project conducted with a support group for women of lived prison experience, based in Adelaide, South Australia, to investigate radio production as a means for supporting women in their transition to life outside of prison. It draws on observations made over a two-year period of radio production and thematic content analysis to investigate the role of community radio as a tool of desistance in formerly incarcerated women.

Keywords

radio

prisoner radio

prison radio

community radio

women

desistance

critical desistance

citizens' media'

Introduction

Women are the fastest growing prison population worldwide (Kajstura 2018). While women and girls represent a small percentage of people in prison overall, numbers have increased significantly, most notably over the past twenty years (Carlton and Segrave 2013).

International research shows a growth of 50 per cent over two decades alongside a comparative increase of 18 per cent in male prisoners during the same period (Walmsley 2015). Across Asia, Oceania, and the Americas, female prisoners have increased, respectively, five, four and three times that of the general populations (Walmsley 2015).

Multiple complex factors contribute to a higher rate of recidivism for women worldwide.

Prison sentences tend to be shorter and more frequent, and typically for non-violent crimes which are embedded within the conditions of their lives (Bloom et al. 2003). For Segrave and Carlton (2013), the increased rate of imprisonment and re-imprisonment of women is causally connected to the entrenchment of social disadvantage enabled under the conditions of neo-liberalism. Release from prison marks a period of heightened precariousness (Carlton and Segrave 2013) and chaotic uncertainty on the outside (Baldry 2010). This is not conducive to successful reintegration into society – more formally referred to as desistance.

Despite the growing number of incarcerated women and girls, fundamental understandings of the role of prisons, as well as issues around rehabilitation, recidivism and desistance are

based on a male norm, failing to meet the needs of women affected by the criminal justice system. In South Australia, where this case study is based, the Department for Correctional Services acknowledges the need to establish a gendered approach to reducing reoffending through the publication of the Women Offender Framework and Action Plan, '*Strong Foundations & Clear Pathways*' (2016). The plan came as a response to a 79 per cent increase in the female daily average prisoner population over ten years. As the plan shows, correctional environments, services, and practices should be responsive to the realities of women's lives, while reflecting and promoting the connections between women and their children, families and loved ones, as well as the broader community.

Much of the importance of considering the specific needs of women relates to family status. The Australian Institute of Family Studies estimates that two-thirds of women in prison are primary caregivers, finding that the family disruption caused by the incarceration of women is disproportionate to the crimes committed (Stathopoulos et al. 2012). For the children of imprisoned mothers, effects include developmental problems, social withdrawal and anti-social behaviours that impact on the wider community. In addition, 80–90 per cent of women prisoners are survivors of some form of emotional, physical or sexual abuse (particularly childhood abuse and family and intimate partner violence) prior to their incarceration (Johnson 2004) and many also exhibit high rates of mental illness (Boyd 2011).

This article outlines the findings from an ongoing action research project conducted with a grassroots organization for women of lived prison experience, based in Adelaide, South Australia, to investigate radio production as a means for supporting women in their transition to life outside of prison. It uses a case study approach that draws on observations made over a two-year period of production, supported by thematic content analysis, to analyse the role of

community radio as a tool of desistance for formerly incarcerated women. What roles can community radio play in supporting the re-entry period for formerly incarcerated women? How can participation in radio production support women as they transition to life outside of the criminal justice system? And how does community radio encapsulate, for these women, what it means to be free?

Literature review

The literature supporting our research derives from a variety of disciplines; media studies, criminology, social work and psychology. In this section we introduce the concept of desistance and outline the main theories and debates that dominate desistance theory discourse, paying attention to relational autonomy and active citizenship as lenses through which radio for desistance can be analysed. We discuss the importance of radio (and more specifically community radio) as a participatory platform and investigate the specific genre of prisoner radio as citizens' media. Finally, as prison abolitionist scholars, we pay special attention to Hart's (2017) Framework for a Critical Desistance with the intention of considering *Radio Seeds* as a tool of desistance for women of lived prison experience.

Desistance

Desistance means not returning to prison – to be free, so to speak. To use the language of criminology, desistance refers to a successful transition from a prison sentence (or sentences) – ‘the experience and process of forging pathways away from offending and criminalized behaviour and maintaining this over time’ (Wright 2017: 12). Desistance is a process that generally does not happen in a straightforward fashion but is, instead, a complicated and

nuanced progression influenced by both internal and external factors. For aspiring desisters (or in the context of our case study ‘de-sisters’), leaving prison can lead to ‘chaotic lives rife with criminal temptations’ (Van Ginneken and Luise Hart 2017: 2) and barriers such as histories of abuse, addiction, mental health concerns and diminished capacity to secure appropriate accommodation and stable employment.

According to Van Ginneken and Luise Hart (2017), desistance research has mostly developed along two lines of connected inquiry: the structural factors that assist people to not offend, and, more commonly, to explain individual differences in desistance for people with similar circumstances. Rocque (2017) documents a wide range of theories of desistance, aimed at explaining the factors that lead to a person changing their criminalized behaviour. Popular theories include the ageing process and brain maturation (especially in relation to why crime tends to decline with age), personality and psychosocial maturation, as well as the capacity to make rational choices. These ‘internally focused theories’ (Rocque 2017: 116) highlight personal behavioural changes made by the individual. Social process theories of desistance, on the other hand, consider ways in which social factors correlate with desistance behaviour. For example, people who leave prison with a strong marriage and/or robust work history tend to have more positive post-release adjustments than those yet to develop strong work and family relationships (Uggen et al. 2004).

Lastly, citizenship and civic participation are also recognized as factors supporting or detracting from desistance (Rocque 2017). The concept of citizenship is intrinsically bound to desistance, given that ‘the convicted and/or incarcerated prisoner is [...] one of the major categories of real exclusion from full entitlement to civil and citizenship rights’ (South 2005: n.pag.). A prison sentence has traditionally and historically included loss of rights so as to

deny a person his or her citizenship and liberty. It can also not be ignored that, in many jurisdictions, the right to vote can be dependent on a person's criminal record and that disenfranchisement signals to the incarcerated 'at least for the duration of their sentence, they are dead to society' (Turner 2012: 324), constructed as 'the other' and distanced from the citizen majority both physically and symbolically.

As Farrall and Calverley (2007) acknowledge, there has been a popular movement from the concept of *national* citizen to *active* citizen. Likewise, radical democratic theory places the idea of citizenship at the core of executing true democratic practices, where a radical democratic citizen is one who is active, 'somebody who acts as a citizen, who conceives of herself as a participant in a collective undertaking' (Mouffe 1992: 4). Informed by Rodríguez (2001), Anderson (2012) specifically connects radical democratic theory to prisoner radio as a form of citizens' media, discussed below.

Desistance, empowerment and relational autonomy

Baldry (in Wright 2017) argues that generalized (gendered) theories of desistance do not particularly assist to understand the relationships between women, recidivism and the criminal justice system. Indeed, we, the authors, recognize that release from prison is not a singular event, but rather part of a lifetime trajectory 'characterised by complex levels of disadvantage, experiences of injustice and oppression, cycles of state intervention (often from an early age), criminalisation and serial imprisonment' (Segrave and Carlton 2013: 1).

Desistance research is often 'inextricably bound to narratives surrounding choice, individual action and responsibility [...] (placing) responsibility for desistance firmly in the hands of the offender' (Hart 2017: 270). As a result, little attention is paid to the wider issues of structural

disadvantage – the policies, practices, and institutional actors, most notably the state itself, which have a fundamental influence on agency and choice (Van Ginneken 2017).

On a similar note, feminist criminology scholars have noted that traditional understandings of empowerment can be problematic (see e.g. Browne 1995, Pollack 2000, Young 1994). Most models of empowerment ‘prioritize an individualist or psychological notion of empowerment’, which fails to recognize the structural disadvantages at play in the lives of criminalized women (Pollack 2000: 76). Young (1994) and Browne (1995), among others, claim most models of empowerment prioritize an individualistic approach that negates the influence of social oppression. Viewed as a psychological characteristic, empowerment becomes dependent on the individual, who can then be personally blamed for their oppression.

We highlight this for two reasons. First, there are close connections between critiques of empowerment and desistance theories, when considering women of lived prison experience. Second, prior research by the authors (Anderson and Bedford 2017a) on the *Radio Seeds* case study (the focus of this article) theorizes the radio show as a vehicle for empowerment, a popular discourse for discussing criminalized women (Pollack 2000). Anderson and Bedford (2017a) are not alone in concluding that women’s empowerment manifests itself through the act of making radio. For example, Gatua et al. (2010) describe community radio in Africa as a model of empowerment while Dahal (2013) highlights how community radio in Nepal fosters women’s empowerment through its contributions to alternative discourses on Violence Against Women (VAW). Furthermore, Mitchell wrote of the potential for women’s community radio to ‘contribute to a feminist public sphere and serve as a tool for women’s empowerment’ (1998: 73).

This is not to say our own (or others') findings are flawed, but rather to highlight the ubiquitous nature of the term 'empowerment' in relation to media and radio studies. There is a need to expand the ways in which empowerment (and by default, also desistance) theory is applied as a lens to understand prisoner radio production. To do this we follow Browne's (1995) lead, considering three main ways that empowerment can be understood::

psychologically, where individuals increasingly feel they are in control of their lives; through practitioner skills, that when used correctly lead to a client's empowerment; and community empowerment – through advocacy, collective action, raising consciousness and sharing experiences. Just as 'the relationship between social and personal empowerment is [...] dynamic and reciprocal' (Pollack 2000: 77), desistance is the outcome of interactions between social/environmental factors and subjective/agency factors.

Theories of empowerment and desistance that focus on the individual, bound to narratives surrounding choice, individual action and responsibility – failing to consider the interactions describe by Pollack (2000) above – need to be scrutinized. If a woman's successful transition from prison is defined through these lenses then her situation is decontextualized from 'the social and political parameters' of her existence (Pollack 2000: 79). To address this, Pollack (2000) draws on the concept of relational autonomy as vital to promote desistance.

Relational autonomy (Nedelsky 1989; Sherwin 1998) argues we all have the capacity to be autonomous, however this capacity is either fostered or undermined 'by virtue of living within social contexts in which resources, safety, relationships and opportunities are inequitably structured' (Pollack 2000: 84) – our capacity to develop autonomy (and therefore agency) is fostered 'within a structure of relationships conducive to autonomy' (Nedelsky

1989: 24–25). A theory of relational autonomy attends to both interpersonal relationships and political relationships.

Interpersonal relationships are fairly self-evident, and include those with family, friends, lovers, partners, children, as well as parole officers, support workers and other formal associates and loose connections. Attending to political relationships ‘allows space to analyse how oppression interferes with the opportunities to exercise autonomy’ (Pollack 2000: 84). As such, relational autonomy can be viewed as tending to and understanding our relationships with each other and with the State. A lens of relational autonomy encapsulates a holistic notion of desistance and will therefore be applied to our analysis below to consider ways by which radio production can be used as a tool of desistance by women of lived prison experience.

Critical desistance

As part of the edited collection *New Perspectives on Desistance* (Hart and van Ginneken 2017), Emily Hart advocates for a ‘critical desistance’, grounded in a prison abolition framework as opposed to one focused on reform, and based on ‘principles of social justice, emancipatory alternatives to punishment and engagement with wider social change’ (Hart 2017: 269). We, the authors, support Hart’s claim that a critical voice in desistance research and associated practices must abandon the assumption that prison needs to be a permanent fixture of criminal justice.

As Angela Davis (2003) stresses in her powerful case for prison abolition, the traditional rhetoric of reform only serves to strengthen an unworkable and unfair system. Instead, dis-

articulating the conceptual link between crime and punishment is essential to develop a more nuanced understanding of the social role of punishment. Such a shift is central to the development of decarceration strategies, including support for more restorative, community-based solutions, proven to be more effective for reducing re-offending. Hart (2017) outlines a Framework for a Critical Desistance, which incorporates seven key points for consideration, through which we, as prison abolitionist scholars, intend to synthesize our findings below.

First, desistance should engage with prison abolitionism and the development of interstitial strategies (those that address both the personal and the political), to recognize that successful desistance occurs *despite* penal punishment and the criminal justice system, rather than because of it. Second, desistance scholarship must focus on the harms caused by the prison industrial complex, not just on prisoners but their families, communities, victims and society as a whole. Third, critical desistance needs to work directly with wider social and welfare reform and recognize the circumstances of those who are incarcerated are classically subjugated by severe structural disadvantage. Fourth, desistance discourse should promote the ‘potential of friendship, love and support rather than punishment’ (Hart 2017: 281) and invest in work that focuses on, for example, support for victims and families, community building, generativity and altruism and transformative justice. Fifth, critical desistance should provide a voice to the powerless that highlights injustice within correctional facilities and recognizes the ‘impact of the multiplicity of oppressions faced by vulnerable populations’ (Hart 2017: 282). Sixth, critical desistance should engage with wider political and social movements and forms of social resistance, participating in prison abolitionist action and combining activism with desistance-promoting strategies that create alternative practice. And finally, desistance should involve a call to halt prison expansion.

Why (community) radio?

Radio has a strong background in radical social activism and participatory community development. From the 1940s Bolivian Tin Miners' Strikes (Buckley 2000), to the anarchist Free Radio Movement across Europe in the 1980s (Waves and Soap 1987), and current international developments in prisoner radio (Bedford 2018), radio has been described as the most important medium for social change (Gray-Felder 2001: 14). While continually changing, it remains relatively affordable to make, transmit and listen to, overcoming many barriers of literacy and Internet connectivity, and able to reach and empower the most geographically remote and socially isolated spaces in society. As Dubber (2014) describes, radio is far from obsolete in the digital age, continuing to play an important role in furthering democratic principles through strengthening communities, representing a site of political activism, and providing a tool for development.

Radio is an adapting and enduring medium, 'quick to embrace digital technology and therefore remain relatively buoyant' (North 2015: 159). In Australia, and despite all other changes in the media landscape, the number of radio stations continues to grow. The most recent polls show radio as the most popular breakfast medium with 86 per cent of Australians over the age of 14 listening on a regular basis, especially in the mornings (Roy Morgan Research 2018, 2016). However, 'mainstream' radio does not necessarily maintain a rigorous reputation for valuing and representing the voices of women and minorities (Veerkamp 2014). According to North (2015: 160), globally radio continues to be a male-dominated profession, with the majority of radio licenses owned by men, and women under-represented across almost all aspects of the industry.

Community radio has forged a ‘space for alternative, and sometimes subversive, women’s voices’, outside of the mainstream radio industries (Mitchell 2000: n.pag.). While diverse, the sector is explicitly a participatory venture – in Australia (where this case study is situated), it is specifically legislated to involve local communities in both production and management. Community broadcasting was founded, according to Rennie et al., on ‘social good principles’, including but not limited to ‘creating opportunities for media self-representation through direct participation’(2017: 1). It is a site where citizens claim cultural rights (Forde et al. 2002).

However, radio has remained comparatively ‘neglected and under researched in feminist media studies’ (Arthurs and Zacharias 2007: 333) and O’Brien (2018: 3) notes a relative under-examination of women’s participation in community radio. Studies that consider community radio through a gendered lens highlight, for example, its potential for empowerment (as discussed above) and as a feminist public sphere (Mitchell 1998: 73). Jalloff demonstrates how women’s participation in the production of community radio acted as a ‘powerful motor in changing their roles and positions in society’ (2007: 347). From the perspective of broadcast output, women’s music programmes on public radio in the United States offer ‘multiple layers of feminist inquiry’ and give voice to those who otherwise might not be heard (Engstrom 2010: 18).

For communities that experience a significant degree of social disadvantage, such as prisoners and their families, community broadcasting provides a critical service (Meadows et al. 2007). There is a growing body of knowledge documenting the benefits of both prison radio (internal to correctional facilities) and prisoner radio (broadcast to a general audience – the genre most aligned to our case study, *Radio Seeds*). Much of the international literature in

this area (see e.g. Anderson 2013a, 2013b, 2012, 2008; Bedford 2016, 2014; Doliwa 2013; Fisher 2009; Gosztanyi 2018; Grimes and Stevenson 2012; McDermott 2004; Minc et al. 2007) concentrates on specific case studies. In addition, previous research by the authors (Anderson and Bedford 2017b) aims to theorize prisoner/prison radio as a genre and demonstrates its potential to maintain community links, engage prisoners in education, improve access to services and information, and act as a powerful force for social change.

Clemencia Rodríguez's (2001) seminal work on citizens' media theory is invaluable for understanding both prison radio and prisoner radio's capacity to foster civic engagement. Rodríguez (2001) draws on a radical democratic definition of active citizenship, to articulate a framework that focuses on the ways in which participation in the media assists people to enact their citizenship as active members of society. Citizenship is enacted as participants intervene and transform the mediascape and become empowered to the point where transformations and change are possible (Rodríguez 2001: 20). In the context of the case study discussed below, we argue that radio production, as citizens' media, builds the capacity for active participation in community radio, as a form of desistance.

In the second half of this article we shall outline our action research methodology and the case study under investigation, *Radio Seeds* – a monthly radio show produced by women of lived prison experience and broadcast on a community radio station in Adelaide, Australia. We then discuss ways in which this radio show acts as a tool of desistance using Hart's Framework for Critical Desistance, as well as paying attention to theories of relational autonomy and active citizenship.

Methodology

This article draws on an action research project, involving the authors and a grassroots women prisoner support group (described below) working together to broadcast a monthly community radio programme, *Radio Seeds*. Action research involves testing ideas in practice as a means of improving social, economic or environmental conditions and increasing knowledge (Hearn et al. 2009), in this case to improve the lives of women of lived prison experience. Action research aligns with feminist-oriented approaches to social justice research (Pickering 2014) and uses ‘a collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that provides people with the means to take systematic action to resolve specific problems’ (Stringer 1996: 15). According to Pickering (2014), as a community-based approach, action research brings participants and researchers together as partners who contribute their own unique strengths and share responsibilities to enrich the understanding of the phenomenon being investigated.

The *Radio Seeds* action research project can also be situated within an arts-led research model, grounded in the understanding that arts can ‘engage in research as a participatory act that allows those involved to more directly express their voices’ (Walsh et al. 2013: 121).

This is what Hartnett et al. refer to as ‘artistry of agency’ that teaches (2011: 335):

writing and public speaking to men and women who have spent their lives feeling silence, or ignored, or incapable of self-expression, as a vehicle for helping them to envision themselves not only as better writers and communicators, but also as empowered citizens.

Arts-based research is also strongly embedded within a social justice methodology, as it emphasizes the voice of the marginalized, promoting a more equal relationship between researcher and research participant (Huss and Cwikel 2005). Our definition of ‘arts’ extends to include radio and other creative industries beyond the more traditional genres of visual art, theatre, and creative writing. Barndt (2004: 230) reminds us that popular communications can democratize art and communication tools integral to grassroots organizing. This is especially the case for community radio. In her work using community radio in Nicaragua as participatory action research to develop a community-based resource management plan, Barndt (2004) explicitly describes the processes of making radio as participatory research that affirms people’s knowledge.

Action research and arts-based research methods are recognized as effective and appropriate for working with prisoners, and the formerly imprisoned (see, e.g. Jarldorn 2018; Parsons and Warmer-Robbins 2002; Pickering 2014; Walsh et al. 2013); however, there is sparse literature that specifically addresses the outcomes of such projects involving radio. Action research involving photo-voice is becoming increasingly popular in prison/social work research, where parallels can be drawn for the purposes of this research. Photovoice uses photography as a means of self-expression, to challenge ‘the politics of representation, providing ex-prisoners a means to surveil operations of power, [and] validate their shared experience’ (Jarldorn 2016: 213). Walsh et al. (2013: 120), for example, identified Photovoice (and other arts-led research methods, including writing and digital storytelling) to be effective approaches to promote the voices of formerly and currently incarcerated women, and to offer opportunities that were meaningful and empowering for the women involved while also contributing to broader change and social justice.

The research project that informs this article gathered data through a number of distinct approaches, mainly:

- Ethnographic participant observations and reflection notes taken during production meetings and broadcast days, as well as attending events as *Radio Seeds* team members.
- Content analysis of radio content, a total of 21 hours of material, archived on the *Radio Seeds* wordpress site (<https://radioseeds.wordpress.com/>).
- Informal conversations with *Radio Seeds* broadcasters during production meetings and broadcast days.

***Radio Seeds* case study**

As mentioned above, this article draws on an action research project, involving the authors and community organization Seeds of Affinity: Pathways for Women, working together to broadcast a monthly radio programme, *Radio Seeds*. Seeds of Affinity is a grassroots, no-for-profit, self-funded organization, comprised mostly of women of lived prison experience, that supports South Australian women trying to reintegrate into society after a jail sentence (Valentish 2018).¹ The women at ‘Seeds’, as it is colloquially known, advocate on behalf of women in prison, raise funds to support them on release, make and donate toiletry products to women when they first arrive at prison and, most importantly, meet twice a week to provide a post-release network of support. This is vital as it combats the isolation many women feel when they exit prison with aspirations of desistance. As founding member (and *Radio Seeds* presenter), Linda Fisk told *The Guardian*:

Some people find their lives excruciating. Not difficult; excruciating. If you don't see a pathway forward, if you're isolated and you don't belong, then when you find something that gives you an escape you turn to it when things get difficult.

(Valentish 2018: n.pag.)

The organization was founded in 2006 by Linda and her probation officer and, according to its website, Seeds 'works together to challenge the ongoing stigmatization faced by women leaving prison, and to build a community where women felt a sense of belonging, solidarity and self worth' (Seeds of Affinity 2016: n.pag.).

Since January 2017, the authors have worked with some of the women who attend Seeds to produce a monthly radio show called *Radio Seeds*, broadcast on a small suburban community radio station, WOW100.5FM, which is located close to the organization's meeting space in a church hall in Semaphore, Adelaide. The radio show was born out of a pilot project, conducted in 2016, which aimed to investigate radio production as a means for supporting women in their transition to life outside of prison. The pilot produced a short series of radio packages that explored the theme 'What I know now' and the series was showcased as part of a one-hour radio special on WOW100.5FM as well as broadcast on a number of other radio stations, published online and shared via a 'listening club' with women incarcerated at the Adelaide Women's Prison. Based on the success of the pilot project (documented in Anderson and Bedford 2017a) *Radio Seeds* became a regular fixture on the WOW100.5FM schedule and an addition to the regular activities of Seeds of Affinity. Approximately twenty women of lived prison experience have participated in *Radio Seeds* broadcasts as live-to-air presenters or journalists producing pre-recorded content for the programme. There is a core

team of six women (including two volunteers who have not experienced incarceration) who are committed to the radio show in an ongoing capacity.

At the time of writing, *Radio Seeds* has broadcast 23 one-hour episodes between February 2017 and December 2018. Almost all content is produced by *Radio Seeds* volunteers, however, content from other prisoner radio programmes has been featured, albeit rarely. While most of the audio is archived on the *Radio Seeds* wordpress site, it is difficult to decisively categorize each piece of content, as interviews often morph into discussions, and viceand versa. Likewise, distinguishing personal from political content is also problematic given how closely these concepts intersect. A rough breakdown of the content reveals three main types of content featured on the programme:

- 40 live and pre-recorded interviews
- fifteen group discussions
- eleven ‘events coverage’ pieces (mostly as vox pops).

Notably there has been ongoing coverage from the Adelaide Women’s Prison, recorded with permission from the South Australian Department for Correctional Services. A series of stories were also recorded in the women’s unit at the Alice Springs Correctional Centre (ASCC), again authorized by the relevant department (through the ASCC General Manager). This has meant *Radio Seeds* has featured voices of incarcerated women in the majority of its episodes.

Discussion: *Radio Seeds* as a tool for desistance

Before moving forward, it is important to acknowledge that multiple factors are at play along the pathway of desistance, and the women involved in our case study – the *Radio Seeds* de-sisters – are in various stages of their post-prison life. For some it has been over ten years since their last period of incarceration; at the other end of the spectrum, others are on home detention bail awaiting sentence. At what point does a woman of lived prison experience become a de-sister? We must also make clear we are not claiming radio production as a sole panacea to address the complex and multiple challenges faced by women as they move on with their post-prison lives.

Radio Seeds and relational autonomy

As discussed previously, considering desistance through a lens of relational autonomy, rather than one of empowerment, can be a useful approach for considering how women can be supported to successfully transition to post-prison life. Relational autonomy is nurtured when we tend to and understand our relationships with each other and with ‘the State’. In the context of radio production, a holistic understanding of desistance prompts us to consider the ways in which *Radio Seeds* assists its volunteers to simultaneously tend to and understand their relationships with each other and with the system.

In a presentation at the recent Sisters Inside 'Imagining Abolition' conference, Seeds of Affinity co-founder and *Radio Seeds* volunteer, Linda Fisk, commented that the act itself of making the radio programme has impacted individual producers and the organization as a whole, developing a strong bond within the team. There is a strong sense of camaraderie that extends to the content of the radio show, where the listener often hears first-time broadcasters

being encouraged and praised for overcoming their nerves and contributing their voices on-air. As explained by one presenter:

I have slowly seen different women, and not naming anyone obviously, but I couldn't attend the last show and I saw that one person had stepped up and got on there. So that's awesome. And just their confidence, their confidence from 'no way, I'm not doing that' to like myself, to getting up there and doing it.

Other times, successes (such as graduating from university or being released from home detention) are celebrated as stories in their own right. The importance of friendship is also highlighted explicitly as an important factor in the desistance process. For example, in 'A story of friendship: Mel and Chris' (broadcast 2 February 2018) we learn about life before, during and after prison through two long-term friends in a candid conversation that highlights the positive effect of role models and supportive networks.

At the same time, producing content for *Radio Seeds* assists de-sisters to tend to their relationships with the State. At regular production meetings, women attending Seeds of Affinity are encouraged to consider who they might want to interview, or hear interviewed, as well as what topics they think need to be addressed on the radio show. In-depth discussions are a common feature on the show, in which women of lived prison experience interrogate each other's understandings of a wide variety of issues such as overcrowding, home detention, the power of education, and increasing rates of death by suicide. Combined with regular interviews with a wide range of people from support organizations, charities, programmes, and activism campaigns, these discussions encourage a high level of constructive reflexivity on the impact of the criminal justice system on a wide

range of societal issues, as well as the value of exposing an audience to these reflections. As explained by a *Radio Seeds* presenter:

Hearing things from a different perspective as to what they probably normally hear them from, even hearing things for the first time, not having an idea of perhaps what happens inside the prison, or even the things that women face when they leave prison, the realities of it. I think sometimes when you're not involved, you don't really tend to think too much about it so it just puts – it's putting those things in people's minds to then start questioning things and opening up other people's minds in the community.

Radio Seeds as *citizens'' media*

Desisters often emphasize the desire to make some important contribution to their communities, suggesting that 'the process of desisting encompasses feelings which can be characterized as active citizenship' (Farrall and Calverley 2007: 137). The act of volunteering with a community radio station, to produce a programme designed to support other women affected by the criminal justice system (and educate the wider public on the issues involved), is in itself an act of civil engagement. While citizenship is often distinguished as a set of entitlements that individuals acquire by virtue of their membership in society, it is more useful in this context to consider citizenship as an active practice, achieved through participation in the community. *Radio Seeds* volunteers commit significant time each month to the programme – not only in the hour of broadcast but many others planning, organizing and creating content for the show.

The fact that this volunteer work results in media production – a discursive public sphere activity when viewed as citizens’ media (Rodríguez 2001) – strengthens the argument that *Radio Seeds* fosters engagement in active citizenship. This is in line with the discourses of deliberative democracy that place ‘the normative core of political community in political participation and the discursive formation of public opinion’ (Karppinen 2007: 497). Media theorists commonly view participation in media production as a direct act of citizenship (Rennie 2002).). Atton and Couldry (2003) argue few involved in alternative media (theory and practice) disagree that citizenship is an issue relevant to alternative media practice.

However, it is important not to frame active citizenship as an extension of the aforementioned responsabilization agenda, and, indeed, developing the capacity to be civically engaged within the unequal social structures faced by many former prisoners is a problematic aspiration (South 2005). It is not uncommon to experience curtailments on one’s life, on re-entry to mainstream society after a period in custody, rendering the performance of citizenship more difficult than for other members of the public (Turner 2012). One *Radio Seeds* presenter discussed this:

I think the most difficult thing is just getting there [...] it doesn’t matter whether it’s prison radio or whether it’s cooking a (fundraising) barbeque, whatever it is we’re trying to organise, it’s just the nature of the beast [...] unfortunately the women’s lives are chaotic. So getting women to get involved and commit and be reliable is probably the most difficult thing. But that’s – that is not a criticism from me, I’m not criticising the women, I understand that is how it is, and I know it’s difficult for them [...] So, I think that’s probably the most difficult part.

For example, home detainees need to work through a significant amount of bureaucratic red tape to gain permission to engage in volunteer activities. As such, *Radio Seeds* works with volunteers to contribute as little or as much as they are able each month. Flexibility is key to allowing potential broadcasters the opportunity to opt in (and out) of being on air, even while the show is presenting live-to-air. This is made possible, in part, by the supportive atmosphere prioritized by both Seeds of Affinity and the *Radio Seeds* team, discussed in more detail below.

Radio Seeds as a tool for critical desistance

As mentioned earlier, desistance discourse ‘needs to engage with abolitionist theory and literature, as the dismantling of the prison industrial complex would have the greatest desistance promoting potential of all’ (Hart 2017: 275). To further explore *Radio Seeds* as a desistance tool, we return to Hart’s (2017) Framework for a Critical Desistance and address each point as a means of concluding our analysis.

Engagement with prison abolitionism² and the development of interstitial strategies

Interstitial strategies, in sociological terms, are those that engage both social and political spaces. Likewise, desistance is promoted when relational autonomy is prioritized and fostered and we have already highlighted ways that *Radio Seeds* tend to both personal and societal relationships. Most episodes of the show intersect interstitial space. One striking example was the June show of 2018, featuring two related pieces of content. The first, ‘Stories from our Sisters’, was a pre-recorded conversation between ‘two women who are doing their very best to never return to prison, despite the odds being stacked against them’ (*Radio Seeds*, 1 June 2018 broadcast). This was followed by a robust discussion about a housing shortage

crisis in Adelaide for women exiting prison, one of the challenges discussed in ‘Stories from our Sisters’.

Focus on the harms caused by the prison industrial complex

Radio Seeds recognizes women with lived prison experience as the experts on what works, as explained by this presenter in relation to a story on a proposal to build a ‘mothers and baby’ unit at the Adelaide Women’s Prison.³

Radio’s come at a really good time – when it’s really time to lift it up a notch and really start pushing certain issues like the mothers and baby unit. And really, as a grassroots community organisation we’re best placed to do that. The academics can write papers and they can do the reports and they can give us the evidence, which is totally awesome, and we need it, but we’re much better placed as women with lived experience to push those issues and many other issues that are going on in that prison.

Rather than investigating how the criminal justice system can ‘help’, the radio show provides a forum to discuss the harms and injustices caused by the prison industrial complex, most often through the voices of those directly affected. For example, *Radio Seeds* was allowed access to visit a newly opened wing in Adelaide Women’s Prison, designed as a privileged programmes-based unit. The women incarcerated there were interviewed about the new unit (mostly in positive terms) for broadcast during the March 2018 programme, with continued visits over the following six months (the content being approved for release by the South Australian Department for Correctional Services’ communications manager). While the new unit (and *Radio Seeds*’ access to it) indicated a positive shift in prison operations, the radio

presenters on the outside were able to express on-air concerns about overcrowding at the prison and critically evaluate the rapid prison expansionist agenda, providing a more in-depth report on the issues and challenges for the broader listening public. Also, and importantly, when planning any on-air discussions for the radio show, attention is paid to raising solutions as well as problems.

Critical desistance needs to go hand-in-hand with wider social and welfare reform

A large part of the work of Seeds of Affinity, and by extension *Radio Seeds*, is to raise awareness of the issues faced by criminalized women to instigate and contribute to wider social and welfare reform. This is achieved through regular speaking engagements with a range of government departments, education institutions, and non-profit agencies. Recordings of the reactions to, and outcomes of, such events demonstrate the impact on personal attitudes and assumptions from hearing from those with lived experience. A key example of this is the coverage of the Seeds' contribution to a state-wide mental health social work forum, where women shared their stories and experiences of the ongoing damaging effects of dealing with disjointed multi-agency welfare services. In interviews (broadcast on the November 2018 programme) with audience members at the end of the event, experienced and often long-serving social work professionals, told how significantly the stories had challenged their assumptions, emotionally impacted them, and changed approaches to their practice.

Promoting the potential of friendship, love, and support rather than punishment

At the core of the work of Seeds of Affinity is the aim of providing a safe, loving and supportive community for women who have been affected by the criminal justice system. As described by one presenter:

It brings the girls together, like it's sort of a bonding time for us, a time where we have heaps of laughs, [...] it's such a carefree environment where we can just be ourselves and have a good laugh, yeah, bring us together, empower the women and hopefully we can get more and more women involved.

As an extension of this, *Radio Seeds* provides women the opportunity to reflect on, discuss, and celebrate each other's achievements. One presenter admitted, 'I guess a lot of our stories are success stories'.

Furthermore, increased discussion and understanding is a step towards repairing damage to prisoners, staff, families, communities, and victims. For instance, one woman's interview with her adult daughter (broadcast 3 March 2017) on how she coped with her mother being in jail provided a rare and powerful insight into the personal impacts of imprisonment and the challenges of rebuilding their family, winning a South Australian Broadcasters' Association award in 2017. On another occasion, the mother of a woman currently incarcerated at the Adelaide Women's Prison, visited the station for a live interview about the pressures of supporting a daughter in prison (broadcast 5 May 2017).

Giving a voice to the powerless and highlight injustice within the system of punishment

A cornerstone of community broadcasting is the ability to give a voice to the most marginalized and unrepresented groups. *Radio Seeds* builds on this principle by providing a voice to prisoners, amongst the most hidden and misrepresented in society. The voices from women incarcerated in the Adelaide Woman's Prison are a regular feature of the radio show, as demonstrated in this broadcast from 1 February 2019.

Vox pop 1: You're listening to Radio Seeds, this is Amanda from LSU, Adelaide Women's Prison, and I just want you to know that nothing is permanent.

Vox pop 2: Hey there, this is Radio Seeds and WOW-FM. I'm talking from AWP and I'd just like to say, from inside incubates greatness.

The dramatic over-representation of people of colour and First Nations Peoples in the global prison population demonstrates vast inequalities of justice. In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make up around 2 per cent of the adult population in Australia, while representing over 27 per cent of adult prisoners (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017). This over-representation is addressed in the many of *Radio Seeds* on-air discussions and implicit in the ways in which women from diverse cultural backgrounds are actively encouraged to participate in programming. In addition, seven stories have explicitly addressed these issues, including a studio interview with the Chief Executive of the Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement, interviews with representatives of the Auckland Against Poverty group from the 2017 *Attack Poverty – Not the Poor* conference in Adelaide, and reports from the Kunga Stopping Violence Programme based in ASCC.

Engage with wider political and social movements and forms of social resistance

Radio Seeds operates independently of state control, with 100 per cent volunteer labour. It represents prison abolitionist collective action through providing a voice, platform and means of connection for the range of social movements involved in developing decarceration frameworks and strategies. Human rights issues relating to, for example, sex workers, trans-women, those at risk of homelessness, First Nations people and domestic violence survivors, have all featured prominently since the show first began broadcast.

This is combined with an activist approach to content development, linking with movements concerned with the prison abolitionist cause. In the most recent example (broadcast in December 2018), producers reported from a flash march on the Queensland Police Headquarters where protesters entered the building chanting the names of First Nations people who have died in police custody, before smearing ochre on the exterior of the building as a representation of the blood spilled at the hands of police (Archibald-Binge 2018).

Call to halt penal expansion

Whether directly or not, *Radio Seeds* challenges the acceptance of the prison expansionist agenda through increasing the voices of women with lived prison experience, providing information on the realities of prison life and facilitating discussion on the issues faced. Explicit examples of the prison abolitionist approach are demonstrated through coverage of the ‘No Gatton Prison’ campaign against the building of a new privately-run prison in Queensland (broadcast 7 September 2018), discussions on the problems of privatization during the 3 August 2018 episode, and an ongoing relationship with ‘Sisters Inside’, a Brisbane-based support group for women in prison. This includes an extended interview with Sisters Inside founder Debbie Kilroy (played across the August and September 2017 programmes) as well as *Radio Seeds* presenting at workshops in the two most recent international *Imagining Abolition* conferences.

To conclude

Further research is, as always, needed. Comparative studies of other prisoner radio programmes would strengthen our claim that community radio can play an invaluable role in

supporting the desistance process. We also recognize the role of audience is lacking from our analysis. Additionally, a longitudinal study that maps desistance for Radio Seeds volunteers over a longer period of time would also be benefit, especially if enhanced by detailed interviews with the participants.

In this article we have used *Radio Seeds* as a case study to demonstrate the capacity of radio as a tool of desistance. That being said, we are clearly focusing on the capacity of community radio rather than the sector more broadly. In Australia at least, community radio is the mediascape most suited to provide a platform for prisoner radio. As citizens' media, *Radio Seeds* allows women of lived prison experience an opportunity to enact their claims to citizenship in an active way. Civic engagement is recognized to have a positive impact on desistance intentions, for the women involved and others who are listening, about to embark on their own journeys of desistance. As one presenter noted:

For them to know they're not alone, that they're not facing it alone – people have come through what they've been through and succeeded, and it's not necessarily the end of the world when they get out. There are things and places that they can [...] become a part of and grow themselves so I think (*Radio Seeds*) offers them hope, [...] to be involved in the radio, so there's plenty of opportunities for them once they leave prison. So I think the biggest thing would be giving them hope, offering them hope, I think that's huge. I know when I left prison, hope had almost been diminished. You always thought about the negatives and what bad effects are going to come from being in prison. You never look at what positives you can take from it and run with.

When considering desistance in the lives of criminalized women, academics and practitioners should tend to issues arising from the personal (agency) and the political (systemic issues).

Radio Seeds promotes reflexivity in both of these areas, by including (and often combining) in-depth treatment of a wide range of topics supporting personal and societal change.

Furthermore, the radio show supports multiple opportunities to reflect on critical desistance tactics that refuse to treat incarceration as a necessary component of a flourishing democracy, whilst contributing to what Mitchell (2000) describes as radio as a feminist public sphere.

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Notes

¹ For more information on Seeds of Affinity you can visit the website

www.seedsofaffinity.org.au or search for their Facebook page.

² Engagement with prison abolition is discussed below.

³ At the time of writing, South Australia is the only State in Australia with no live-in accommodation for babies or children of mothers in custody (McIntyre 2017).