

DISCUSSION PIECE

THE MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF PRISONS: BOOT CAMPS OR HOLIDAY CAMPS?

*Ian Marsh*¹

Introduction

The focus of this brief overview is on the ways in which the media represents the criminal justice system in action; with a particular focus on how prisons and the punishment of imprisonment are presented by the British mass media. It will consider real life or factual representations as well as fictional accounts and presentations. Of course, it is not always easy to separate out what is fact from fiction - and fictional programmes such as dramas and soap operas will usually try and make their 'fiction' as realistic as possible. As Mason puts it, it is a case of 'Audiences "commuting" between the realms of factual news and entertainment programming has implications for public perceptions of law enforcement agencies, the courts and prisons as well as offenders and victims.'²

As well as the massive interest the general public have with crime and criminals, there is also a deep fascination with how these crimes and criminals are discovered and dealt with by the criminal justice system – with how the police go about catching and charging offenders, with how the courts and judiciary sentence them, and with what happens to those offenders who enter the penal system. And criminal justice systems are massive operations. Home Office data on police powers and procedures showed that in 2008/2009 the police made almost 4,000 arrests for recordable crime each day (1,456,347 a year) and stopped and searched over 4,100 people each day.³ Ministry of Justice data for 2009 showed that 1,693,200 defendants (4,638 each day) were proceeded against in courts in England and Wales, with 1,405,900 being sentenced by those courts.⁴ However, in spite of those quite dramatic figures, most people still only have a fairly limited experience of the criminal justice system and its workings. As with our knowledge and understanding of criminal behaviour, so our understanding of the criminal justice system is derived largely from the mass media we consume. Crime stories are a staple of many forms of our media; and these stories often focus on crimes that have reached the stage of getting to court. There is a tremendous interest in

¹ Principal Lecturer in Criminology, Liverpool Hope University, marshi@hope.ac.uk

² P. Mason, 'Introduction: Visions of Crime and Justice', in P. Mason (ed.) *Criminal Visions: Media Representations of Crime and Justice*, (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2004), p.5.

³ Home Office, *Police Powers and Procedures, England and Wales 2008/9*, (London: HMSO, 2010)

⁴ Ministry of Justice, *Sentencing Statistics: England and Wales 2009 Statistical Bulletin* (2009)

'who gets what' from within our criminal justice system. And because the media will almost inevitably focus on the more spectacular crimes and those which lead to the most severe punishments, the picture portrayed by the media about law enforcement and punishment is liable to be distorted in a similar way. Therefore much of the media coverage of punishment focuses on prisons, the most severe form of punishment available in our criminal justice system, even though the great majority of offenders who are sentenced do not receive prison sentences. After all, tales of offenders being fined do not usually make as interesting reading or viewing as do stories and films about imprisonment.

While it is understandable that the media focuses on solved crimes, through covering the trials and courtroom drama, Leishman and Mason point out that this coverage can give the wider public the impression that most crime is solved and that the police are pretty effective in detecting crime - impressions which information on the actual clear up rates of all crimes committed demonstrates to be way off the mark.⁵ The crimes covered by the media are the more solvable sort of crimes because, as mentioned above, they are the more serious sorts of crime, such as murder and sexual offences. These are the crimes which the police will usually solve - because they will spend considerable resources on high profile and serious crimes and because such crimes are often relatively easy to solve as the offender (in the case of murder) will more often than not have had some previous association (often a close association through marriage or family ties) with the victim. This sort of media coverage might reassure the public that the police are effective at catching criminals, but can also lead to criticism when they fail to solve crimes.

British Crime Surveys have consistently found that television or radio news is cited by most people (nearly three quarters of the population) as their major source of information about the criminal justice system, with newspapers also having a significant impact.⁶ So it would seem fair to conclude that how the media portrays our penal system will have a major influence on public knowledge and public opinion.

Historical and Modern Representations

The notion and practice of using imprisonment as a penal sanction for serious offences, a specific form of punishment, dates back less than 200 years. Although prisons of one type or another had existed before this time, such prisons were used mainly for holding people before

⁵ F. Leishman and P. Mason, *Policing and the Media: Facts, Fictions and Factions* (Cullompton: Willan Publishing 2003)

⁶ C. Kershaw et al. *The British Crime Survey* (London: HMSO, 2000). S. Nicholas, C. Kershaw and A. Walker *The British Crime Survey 2006-2007* (London: HMSO, 2007).

trial or while awaiting the carrying out of a sentence such as execution or transportation. Minor criminality, dealt with in the summary courts, could attract imprisonment, but for short periods only and more in the shape of detention than anything else. Before the 1840s, punishments tended to be visible, quick and harsh, symbolised by the gallows, or more distant in the shape of transportation (the overwhelmingly usual experience).

Michel Foucault's examination of, and explanation for, changes in both the nature and the meaning of punishment offer us one popular starting point. Foucault's work focused on issues to do with knowledge, power and the human body, and was not confined to the area of crime and punishment. However, as regards our interest here, he examined the emergence of crime and the changes in the form of punishment in the West during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This was, in Britain, the time of the industrial revolution and of consequent hectic and dramatic social change that most historical scholarship sees as producing the widespread concern visible amongst politicians and social elites over the threat to social order that might result from this newly urban working class. In his classic text, *Discipline and Punish*, subtitled *The Birth of the Prison* (1977), Foucault examined and analysed the socio-cultural changes brought about by the emergence of modern society and applied them to the area of crime and punishment. In his detailed study of the prison system that emerged in the West during the early nineteenth century, he emphasised that the methods of dealing with criminals in these modern prisons was part of a wider process of control and regimentation in Western society. His work examines and explains the disappearance of punishment as a public spectacle of violence and the emergence of the prison - he saw the target of punishment as changing, it focused on the soul of the offender rather than just the body, on transforming the offender rather than just avenging the particular crime. Foucault saw these developments as illustrating how power operated in modern society, with open, physical force and the ceremonies around it replaced by a more detailed regulation of offenders – troublesome individuals were removed from society and, hopefully, re-socialized, rather than being broken and destroyed.

So the 'modern' prison was established, emerging in continental Europe from the late eighteenth century – and imprisonment became a normal form of punishment. In Britain, with the decline in public, physical punishments and the end of transportation, first to America from the 1780s and then to its replacement destination, imprisonment soon became the main area for the disposal of offenders who had been found guilty of the more serious forms of criminal behaviour. The development of the prison was accompanied by debate and argument as to the best method of organising and managing imprisonment as a form of punishment; and of the running prisons in terms of organisational structure.

This debate included comment on the pros and cons of different systems of prison discipline – and in particular, the separate system and the solitary system. In the separate system, prisoners theoretically spent all their times in single cells where they would eat, work and sleep – this, it was believed, would stop prisoners being contaminated by fellow prisoners and would allow them to contemplate their offending and emerge reformed characters. The silent system had versions where prisoners could be allowed to associate with and work with other prisoners but they had to be silent at all times. Both systems were influenced by the religiously motivated reformers of the time; being 'based on the idea that first offenders or young offenders could be contaminated by more experienced criminals, and that prisoners should be silent, or separate from others, to allow reflection and repentance for their criminal behaviour.'⁷

Contemporary writers and commentators examined and discussed these two systems; and one such writer who was hugely influential at this time was Charles Dickens. Dickens was strongly critical of the separate system and, given his importance as an author and writer who was read widely in his day (and remains, of course, one of the great figures of English literature), we will look briefly at his ideas here. Dickens argued that the separate system was 'cruel and wrong', and even if devised with the best of philanthropic intentions, those who were behind its introduction did not know what they were doing. Johnston (2006) points out that Dickens was particularly concerned about the psychological effects this system had on prisoners. She quotes from Dickens' *American Notes* of 1842:

Very few men were capable of estimating the immense amount of torture and agony which this dreadful punishment, prolonged for years, inflicts upon the sufferers ... there is a depth of terrible endurance to it which none but its sufferers can fathom, and which no man has a right to inflict upon his fellow creature... I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body.⁸

As an aside, it is not surprising that the prison and prison life feature regularly in Dickens' writing given his family's first hand experience of imprisonment. Dickens' father was a naval clerk who got into financial troubles and debt when Charles was a young lad, in the early 1820s. Eventually arrested for unpaid debt, Charles's father, John, was sent to a debtor's prison in South London and all the family belongings were sold to the pawnbroker. The whole Dickens' family moved into the debtor's prison for a while as it gave them a better standard of living than their previous difficult circumstances. Charles moved out to separate

⁷ H. Johnston, "'Buried Alive": Representations of the Separate System in Victorian England', in P. Mason (ed.) *Captured by the Media: Prison Discourse in Popular Culture*, (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2006) p.106.

⁸ *Ibid*, pp.107-8.

accommodation but remained living close to his father in prison; after leaving prison Dickens' father and family lived together in Camden, London with Charles joining them. It was these first-hand experiences of prison life which Dickens used in many of his famous works, including *Pickwick*, *David Copperfield* and *Little Dorrit*. Of course, Dickens' views were not the only literary or media representations of the separate system. As well as the concern for the mental health of prisoners articulated by Dickens, there was an alternative viewpoint which did not want this system to be seen as too soft.

To return to more general issues concerning the emergence of the modern prison, the moving of punishment away from the public arena to behind the walls of the prison has given this form of punishment a secrecy that means the wider public are pretty poorly informed as to what prisons are like and how they function. It has meant that most people rely on the media for their information and understanding of prison and prison life. Mason points out that media representations of prison do not only affect the wider public but can and do influence those working in the criminal justice system. He refers to two Director Generals of the British prison service acknowledging the role the media played in their own experience of prisons: 'In 1992, Derek Lewis confessed that prior to taking the post as head of the prison service, "his knowledge of prison life came from the media and the BBC comedy programme *Porridge*". Also, 'More recently, the current Director General, Martin Narey, said that the BBC documentary *Strangeways* "played a big role in my deciding to join the prison service".⁹

Given that crime is a natural and major subject for the media to cover and that the most serious crimes receive the greatest coverage it is perhaps inevitable that the media presents a distorted picture of crime and punishment (as the more serious crimes naturally receive the most severe punishments). So much of the media coverage of punishment focuses on prisons (the most severe punishment available within our criminal justice system). However, in spite of prison being the form of punishment that most usually springs to mind when punishment is considered, our knowledge of prisons is limited. As Levenson puts it,

Despite this familiarity (with prisons), few people are aware of even the basic facts about imprisonment, such as the number of prisoners or the number of prisons, let alone the realities and routines of prison life. Rather, the familiarity is based on the symbolism of the prison and is fed by media images and portrayals of the prison in television and film, from *Porridge* to *Prisoner Cell Block H*, *Escape from Alcatraz* to *Shawshank Redemption*.¹⁰

⁹ P. Mason, 'The screen machine: Cinematic Representations of Prison', in P. Mason (ed) *Criminal Visions: Media Representations of Crime and Justice*, (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2003) pp.279-280.

¹⁰ J. Levenson, 'Inside Information: Prisons and the Media', *Criminal Justice Matters*, 43, (2001) 14-15.

There are obvious dangers with this reliance on media portrayals. The media coverage will almost inevitably highlight the more extreme aspects of prison life, such as riots or deaths in prison - the events they see as newsworthy. However as well as emphasising punishment, prisons can be portrayed as easy going and even privileged places. Indeed these two contrasting aspects of the media representation of prisons – as easy going ‘holiday camps’, as the popular press regularly put it, or as dangerous and violent places (akin to American ‘boot camps’) – are highlighted by Coyle.¹¹ On the one hand, prisons are portrayed as dangerous, where there is an ever present threat of violence and brutality (either from other prisoners or the prison staff). On the other hand, the holiday camp portrayal suggests prisoners lie in bed all day if they chose to, eat well and have amenities and leisure activities that most people on the outside do not have access to (these two media pictures are explored in the boxed insert below). In reality, Coyle points out, daily life in prison is ‘far removed from either of these extremes’. In similar vein, Levenson makes the point that giving people accurate information about the criminal justice system is vital to secure public confidence in it; and as the public relies so heavily on the media any misrepresentation is very damaging.

In contrast to these media representations and images of prison life, the most overwhelming feature of prison life would seem to be the routine and boring nature of it. Large institutions necessarily follow a fairly strict timetable and routine; and the features that are common in institutions of many kinds are liable to be more important in custodial institutions that have to be focused on security. The prison day is dominated by routine – cells are unlocked and locked at given times, meals are served at the same time and the activities of the day follow a tightly scheduled pattern. Not surprisingly, perhaps the major feature of day to day prison life is the monotony of it.

Press Representations

The extracts below illustrating the contrasting extremes of the media picture of prison life – the holiday camp and the brutal and violent environment – and are taken from a number of different British newspapers, national and local, and from the BBC website. In reading these extracts it is important to bear in mind that the circulation figures for popular, tabloid newspapers are high and generally higher than for ‘quality’ newspapers and the way they portray prison life will help inform the views of large sections of the population.

¹¹ A. Coyle, *Understanding Prisons* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 2005) .

'Teen Killers' Jail is 'Holiday Camp'

Brutal teen knife killers are living in the lap of luxury at a holiday camp jail, an outraged ex prison worker declared today.

The country's worst juvenile villains can watch giant 50in plasma screen TVs, play the latest computer games and even choose their own toilet seat covers for their en-suite bathrooms... pampered prisoners at Warren Hill jail in Hollesley, near Woodbridge, Suffolk, enjoyed a lavish millionaire lifestyle... teenage murderers, including those who carry out violent stabbings in London, had Nintendo Wii consoles before they were available on the high street.'

The Sun, 27 July 27 2009

'Prison? It's just like a holiday camp: Animal rights terrorists gloat on website about 'fantastically easy, blissful' life behind bars

Animal rights extremists jailed for a campaign of terrorism have mocked their punishment, describing prison as a 'holiday camp'. Seven fanatics were sentenced to a total of 50 years for their ruthless intimidation of workers connected to a laboratory which used animals in experiments...

But on a website for supporters of the group called Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty, they gloat that life in jail is 'fantastically easy' They boast of living in 'ensuite' pads, enjoying delicious vegan cuisine and spending their days painting and studying literature. One thug calls his jail 'Butlins' while another describes scoffing dairy-free chocolate as she watches the US sitcom *Friends*.' *Daily Mail*, 24 December 2010

'Now prisoners get to watch TV to save distress

Prison bosses were criticised yesterday for spending thousands of pounds on an information service designed to stop inmates suffering "emotional distress". Rapists, murderers and paedophiles waiting to be locked up at Pentonville jail will be comforted by a state-of-the-art TV providing information on prison life. The Ministry of Justice said it wanted to stop "boredom" and "emotional distress", as well as lessening the risk of self-harm.

The decision to install the flatscreen TV ... was slammed as a waste of taxpayers' money and an insult to crime victims. Blair Gibbs, spokesman for the Taxpayers' Alliance, said: "If they can spend money on this, why can't they build prisons". A Spokeswoman for the Ministry of Justice said: "The last report by the Chief Inspector of Prisons criticised Pentonville for holding prisoners in the reception area for long periods of time with no distractions which led to boredom and *emotional distress*... *This will paid for out of the prison's annual budget.*"

The Daily Express, 2 July 2007

'Huntley's happy to die in jail: child killers cushy life

Ian Huntley is happy Britain's law chief wants him to die behind bars – because he has got such a cushy life in jail. Huntley, 33, stunned jail staff with his reaction to the declaration by the Lord Chancellor Lord Falconer that he should never go free. The double child killer is so comfortable being a con he does not want to be let out.

Huntley is monitored round the clock in Wakefield Prison's healthcare wing – so he does not get vigilante attacks. He gets three meals a day in the West Yorkshire jail – plus extra dishes in cookery classes... He also gets regular letters from smitten sweetheart Maxine Carr, who was also jailed for giving him a false alibi for the 2002 murders of 10-year old Soham schoolgirls Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman ... and unlike other inmates he is allowed to see visitors in a private room. According to insiders the monster, who was ordered to serve at least 40 years, "struts round as if he owns the place". *The Daily Star*, 26 March 26, 2007

'Concerns over prison conditions

Conditions at Dartmoor Prison are putting staff, visitors and the public in "real danger", a report has claimed. The Independent Monitoring Board says the jail has too many prisoners and that some cells are "barely habitable"...Margaret Blake, vice chairman of the Independent Monitoring Board, formerly the Jail's Board of Visitors, said: "We have been concerned for some time... that the condition of the prison is deteriorating... Shortages and resources mean that prisoners are left longer in their cells. Tensions can increase and frustrations can lead to a greater risk of attacks between prisoners or attacks on staff." *BBC News* 5 November 2009

'Chief inspector of prisons says conditions in young offender institutions are deteriorating

The chief inspector of prisons, Nick Hardwick, says young people aged 15/6 to 18 are being held in deteriorating conditions in the Youth Offenders Institutions (YOI) network, with fewer feeling safe while they are locked up.

The inspection showed that fewer young inmates felt they could tell someone they were being victimised or believed a member of staff would take them seriously.'

Guardian, 26 October 2011

'European watchdog criticises UK prison overcrowding

European prison watchdogs have strongly criticised the acutely overcrowded conditions in jails in England and Wales, saying a fresh approach is needed to eradicate the problem.

The Council of Europe's committee on the prevention of torture and inhuman and degrading punishment said too many inmates continued to spend too much time locked in their cells with little access to meaningful activities...

The committee raised concerns about the number of incidents of violence between inmates at Huntercombe young offenders' institutions, and criticised the use of restraint techniques that involved inflicting pain. It said that at the time of its visit a technique known as the nose grip was being used 40 times a month by staff ... This involved the nose being pulled back and a finger rubbed hard across the base of the nostrils. The delegation said this technique should be banned.' *Guardian*, 8 December 2009)

'Prison wing 'unfit for animals' closed down

A damning report from environmental health inspectors has led to the closure of a prison wing after inmates threatened the Prison Service with a high court action. The last of 80 prisoners from Gurney wing at Norwich prison were moved to other jails this week as the 81,333 prison population in England and Wales was expected to reach record levels today...

The wing was originally scheduled for closure in January after the Independent Monitoring Board declared it was "unfit for animals", but it was reopened after three days because of overcrowding. The Prison Service only put inmates in cells certified as fit for habitation, but prisoners complained they were living next door to uncertified cells which had broken soil stacks, mould on walls, nesting pigeons, rodent infestation and a terrible stench. Environmental health inspectors found that cells on Gurney wing were between 50 and 75 times more hazardous to inmates' health than normal housing conditions.'

Guardian, 5 October 2007)

Cinematic and Media Representations

As was suggested earlier, the images of prison from the media are a, if not the, major source of information on prison and prison life for the vast majority of the population. Much of this

information comes from fictional representations of prison in literature, film and television as well as newspapers.

In an overview of cinematic representation of the prison, Mason describes how prison has been a feature in films from the early days of the cinema.¹² He categorises the main different approaches and themes of the 300 plus prison films that have been made. Some highlight the sheer brutality of prison life (*Midnight Express* (1978), *McVicar* (1980) and *Scum* (1979), for example). Others focus on prisoners battling with the authorities and jailers (such as *Cool Hand Luke* (1967) and *Papillon* (1973)). In spite of the number and range of prison films Mason points out that there is a lack of literature on the media representation of imprisonment; and the prison film is not a recognised genre, in that ‘prison film’ is not used in the same way as ‘western’ or ‘gangster film’. Also, and in a similar way in which a prison scene or example might be part of a piece of literature, as in the case of many of Dickens’ books, a major problem with the term ‘prison film’ is deciding what proportion of a film should be made inside a prison to ‘earn’ that categorisation. Scenes of imprisonment can be found in many different types of film, and in a wide range of television programmes.

In suggesting different themes of the prison film, Mason argues that ‘cinematic representations of prison are not easily classified ... due partly ... to the variation in the number of prison films that have been made across the decades.’¹³ He does, though, attempt to suggest some main themes. These include, the representation of the prison as a machine that grinds people down with its rules and regulations and the emphasis on the effect of imprisonment on the newly imprisoned offender – in particular, the dehumanizing process of becoming a prison statistic.

Although perhaps not as much a feature of day to day television as the police, prison and prisoners are a common feature on a range of television programmes. In her review of this aspect of media coverage Jewkes provides a number of examples: ‘the world of prison and prisoners has now permeated most television genres: sit-com (*Porridge*), ‘serious’ drama (*Buried*, *Oz*), light entertainment drama (*Within these Walls*, *Bad Girls*, *The Governor*, *Prisoner*), documentary (*Strangeways*, *Life: Living with Murder*, *Jailbirds*, *Prison Weekly*, *Feltham Sings*) and reality TV (*The Experiment*, *Real Bad Girls*), to name but a few.’¹⁴

¹² Mason, ‘The screen machine: Cinematic Representations of Prison’ pp.279-280.

¹³ Mason, *Criminal Visions*, p.184.

¹⁴ Y. Jewkes, ‘Creating a Stir? Prisons, Popular Media and the Power to Reform’, in P. Mason (ed) *Captured by the Media: Prison Discourse in Popular Culture*, (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2006).

Here we will look at the television programme that is most generally cited as influencing people's views on and knowledge of prison - *Porridge*. This was a BBC television sitcom broadcast between 1974 and 1977, written by Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais and starring Ronnie Barker and Richard Beckinsale. It was set in a fictional prison 'HMP Slade' and led to various spin offs including a film and a follow-up series *Going Straight*. While dramas and comedies are not always seen as bona fide sources of information, it is interesting that *Porridge* was popular with British prisoners who recognised it had a high degree of authenticity. As ex-prisoner and, more recently, *Guardian* columnist Erwin James put it:

What fans could never know, however, unless they had been subject to a stint of Her Majesty's Pleasure, was that the conflict between Fletcher and Officer Mackay was about the most authentic depiction ever of the true relationship that exists between prisoners and prison officers in British jails up and down the country ... When I was inside, *Porridge* was a staple of our TV diet. In one high security prison a video orderly would be dispatched to tape the programme each week. If they missed it, they were in trouble.¹⁵

In her examination popular media and prisons, Jewkes also considers the impact and importance of *Porridge*. A key element of this programme was its depiction of human relationships and particularly that between the old-time, persistent criminal, Norman Fletcher, and the naïve, young first times offender, Lennie Godber. The relationship between a street-wise, cunning mentor figure and an innocent, gullible friend is common to many British sitcoms (Jewkes cites *Only Fools and Horses*, *Steptoe and Son* and *Black Adder*, among others, as examples). This element is not necessarily dependent on the prison setting, however other aspects of the programme are. The series illustrates a period in British prison history when the 'justice' model was coming to the fore and the welfare/rehabilitation emphasis of the previous decade was being undermined. Jewkes sees this 'dynamic ...[as being] represented in the form of a 'soft' screw and a 'hard' screw; the benign and well-meaning Mr Barrowclough, who always saw in his charges the potential for reform, and officious disciplinarian, Mr MacKay, who ruled his wing with an iron will and military disposition'.

From a more critical angle, *Porridge* can also be interpreted as working against prisoners' interests and against penal reform by the rather cosy picture of prison life which might make the wider public less concerned about prison conditions and the reality of a prison system facing dangerous levels of overcrowding. From this perspective, *Porridge*, while giving the public some sense of what prison is like, could be seen as having ignored the humdrum, boring but often tense reality of prison life by showing it to be, basically, a 'bit of a laugh'. It does not encourage the viewing public to think critically about prisons. Jewkes compares it with *Bad Girls* in that it is essentially character driven and only explores imprisonment at a

¹⁵ E. James, 'Doing Time with Porridge', *Guardian*, 5 October 2005.

relatively superficial level. Summarising Wilson and O'Sullivan's study of the representation of prison in film and television drama (2004), Jewkes comments:

Their recurrent theme is that *Porridge* has failed because it presents a sanitised, comic version of confinement, which allows the public to sidestep the reality of incarceration and absolves them from concerning themselves with the grim reality of confinement at Her Majesty's Pleasure.¹⁶

It seems fair to say, then, that the media has a massive influence on the way the prison service is perceived by the wider public. Furthermore, even for those who have first-hand experience of the prison service, through working in or studying the area, it is almost inevitable that their initial ideas and understanding will have come from the media.

¹⁶ D. Wilson and S. O'Sullivan, *Images of Incarceration, Representations of Prison in Film and Television Drama*, (Winchester: Waterside Press, 2004); Y. Jewkes, 'Creating a Stir'.