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2013

## Challenging the Media-Incarceration Complex Through Media Education

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### Recommended Citation

Yousman, B. (2013). Challenging the media-incarceration complex through media education. In S.J. Harnett, E. Novek, & J.K. Wood (Eds.), *Working for justice: a handbook of prison education and activism* (pp. 141-159). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

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## Challenging the Media-Incarceration Complex through Media Education

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It's a typical night of television in the U.S.: on HBO a gang of African American prisoners are assaulting another captive, a white man, passing him back and forth and laughing as they abuse him; on NBC a group of black female inmates are wreaking havoc in a hospital emergency room; flip to another channel and you find a Hollywood film featuring a group of prisoners hijacking a plane and terrorizing the passengers and crew; over on MSNBC a reality show called *Lockup* profiles a prisoner who reportedly performed cannibalistic acts; on still another channel *Law and Order* detectives are harshly interrogating an inmate in a small prison meeting room; later in the evening, the same type of scene will play out in a rerun of the syndicated program *NYPD Blue*—prime time fun for viewers of all ages; business as usual for the ratings-driven U.S. television industry.

Focusing on prime time dramatic television as the most prevalent source of fictional images of violence, crime, and incarceration, in this essay I address the distorted narratives and images that saturate popular television dramas. I also draw upon interviews I conducted with ex-prisoners to show how media representations of imprisonment, though inaccurate and misleading, shape the perceptions even of those who have themselves been incarcerated. This is a startling finding, for it demonstrates that even prisoners and former prisoners are susceptible to having their thoughts about crime and punishment shaped by the spectacular distractions of mass media. Having established the power of what I hereafter call the media-incarceration complex to warp our thinking about crime, violence, and imprisonment, I then offer some thoughts on how media education can offer viewers tools for questioning and deconstructing mass mediated

images of prisons and prisoners and, more broadly, how citizens can fight back against media injustice through a variety of strategies and interventions.

*Media Power and “Training in Dependence” in the Carceral State*

Beginning with the invention of motion pictures at the end of the nineteenth century, and especially since the rise of television in the mid-twentieth, important social, political, and economic trends are increasingly defined by media images and stories. As Kellner writes:

Social and political conflicts are increasingly played out on the screens of media culture, which display spectacles such as sensational murder cases, terrorist bombings, celebrity and political sex scandals, and the explosive violence of everyday life. Media culture not only takes up always-expanding amounts of time and energy, but also provides ever more material for fantasy, dreaming, modeling thought and behavior, and identities (2003, p. 1).

One of the most common of these captivating media spectacles is found in frightening images of dangerous, violent prisoners: men, usually, who are just barely contained by the criminal justice system. In an era when the massive buildup of the prison-industrial complex is happening without much public scrutiny, or even knowledge, understanding the role that media images play in shaping our perception of prisons and prisoners is crucial to understanding why policies such as building more prisons and locking up ever-greater numbers of people are accepted as commonsense steps in keeping innocent citizens safe from the predators who are waiting to strike the minute we let our guard down, the minute we go “soft on crime.”

Those who question the legitimacy, efficacy, or morality of the incarceration nation we have created are often framed as out-of-touch liberals while the punitive paradigm has become dominant. As [Cusac \(2009\)](#) points out, during the last few decades the legal system in the U.S. became increasingly harsh, as more and more prison sentences were handed down and as these sentences became longer and longer. Media stories and images are central to maintaining and legitimating this punitive discourse, and to the creation of a culture of fear that is among the

dominant political forces in the twenty-first century. In regard to television news, for instance,

Altheide writes:

Crime is but one example of a larger array of images that promote the sense that the world is out of control. Helplessness is combined in many reports with a sense of randomness. This promotes incredible anxiety and fear that something might happen (1) which we know about; (2) about which little can be done and (3) which may occur at any time. The only response we seem to have is to wait and prepare (e.g. get armed, lock doors, build walls, avoid strangers and public places)... Moreover, these responses also promote a very strong urge to get help from somewhere, anywhere. This is why audiences seem so willing to accept definitions of what the problem is – the causes of crime, what can be done about it, and how limited our alternatives are—which usually involves the police and criminal justice system (2002, pp. 136-137).

The fear generated by media images and stories is thus foundational to our acceptance of the punitive, carceral state.

Other scholars have documented how this fear has become a key tool for those seeking to justify the ever-expanding prison population, the construction of more and more prisons, and the diversion of more and more funds into the growing prison-industrial complex ([Alexander, 2010](#); [Cusac, 2009](#); [Dyer, 2000](#); [Mauer, 1999](#); [Meiners, 2007](#); [Miller, 1996](#)). In fact, a report issued by The National Criminal Justice Commission in the mid-1990s ([Donziger, 1996](#)), argued for direct connections among distorted media images of crime, rising public fears, and the severe rise in incarceration, pointing out that the media environment is awash in hyperviolent images of crazed criminals, despite the fact that actual crime has been on the decline for several decades. As Glassner writes about the first decade of the twenty-first century: “In the nation’s largest cities, murder accounted for only .2 percent of all crimes, and in the suburbs of those cities, murder accounted for just .01 percent. Yet not only are murder stories a staple of the coverage in those cities, accounting for 36 percent of the crimes reported on the TV news, the newscasts warned suburban viewers that crime was moving to their areas” (2010, p. 230). Thus, rather than thinking of our television and computer screens as windows on reality, a more apt metaphor

would be that of the funhouse mirror, as the commercial media display distorted images of crime and violence that have only a tenuous connection to the real world they seem to reflect.

Furthermore, the fear that is generated by these distorted media reports of crime, violence, and chaos is not a generalized or vague anxiety but a focused and specific fear related to gender, race, and class divisions. Scholars have identified how media stories of crime coalesce around the image of the dangerous, predatory, and depraved black male or, less often, the drug-addicted, sexually-promiscuous black female ([Alexander, 2010](#); [Collins, 2009](#); [Dixon, 2010](#); [Giroux, 2009](#); [Mauer, 1999](#); [Meiners, 2007](#); [Miller, 1996](#); [Shanahan and Morgan, 1999](#)). As Bauman argues:

The poor are portrayed as lax, sinful, and devoid of moral standards. The media cheerfully cooperate with the police in presenting to the sensation-greedy public lurid pictures of the “criminal elements,” infested by crime, drugs and sexual promiscuity, who seek shelter in the darkness of their forbidding haunts and mean streets. The poor provide the usual suspects to be round up, to the accompaniment of a public hue and cry, whenever a fault in the habitual order is detected and publicly disclosed (2007, p. 28).

The distortions of the commercial media system are thus not simply random inaccuracies, inevitable to any system of representation. We can identify patterns in these images and stories; patterns that vilify the poor and people of color by associating them with deviant lifestyles and imagined crime waves.

Despite the media obsession with crime and chaos, experts from across the ideological spectrum agree that the rate of crime (as tracked by government criminal justice statistics), especially violent crime, has been falling since the mid-1980s ([Cusac, 2009](#); [Glassner, 2010](#); [Irwin, 2005](#); [Miller, 1996](#)). Nonetheless, according to public opinion polls, most Americans believe that the nation suffers from more crime than ever before ([Dyer, 2000](#)). And in one peculiar way, they are correct, for while crime in the streets is falling, crime and violence on television is escalating. As George Gerbner has argued, television is the primary storyteller in

U.S. culture and the stories told by the television industry are often stories of intense violence and mayhem. Since the 1960s, Gerbner and his colleagues have presented compelling research suggesting that immersion in the hyperviolent world of television is associated with a fearful emotional state among heavy viewers of television (see Morgan, Shanahan, and Signorielli, 2009 for a comprehensive summary of Gerbner's cultivation theory and research). Furthermore, this fear has important political implications. As Gerbner said (in a 1991 interview) about those who grow up in the cultural environment produced by television:

You're more insecure, more afraid, more dependent. So this becomes training in dependence. This is training to seek protection from the "stronger" members in society. And this is often training in approving repression of other people if you consider that it enhances your security. This represents itself in increasing demands for capital punishment, in approving police action, in approving the army, even foreign wars because they're considered to enhance your chances of survival (in Closepet and Tsui, 2002, p. 494).

Gerbner thus argues that the scary images of film and television have primed viewers to accept the severe measures advocated by "get tough on crime" politicians for the past four decades. Meanwhile, research has shown that the mainstream news media provide viewers with little information about the massive scale of incarceration or the race- and class-based disparities of imprisonment in the U.S. (Yousman, 2009), meaning that we are both scared and ignorant, fearful and misinformed.

This alarming confluence of fear and ignorance has been reinforced by two interrelated phenomena: a dearth of journalistic investigation into the current state of incarceration, and a wealth of lurid, graphic, images of violent prisoners and criminals on display in both fictional programming and from a degraded television news industry that is similarly organized around entertainment values and commercial priorities. While the commercial news media tend to ignore what is happening inside U.S. prisons and jails (except for sensationalistic programming,

like MSNBC's *Lockup*, which focus on riots, escapes, and gang wars), incarceration is a significant and recurring theme for the entertainment media industries. Prison films are abundant, rap musicians refer frequently to life behind bars, and even the video game industry has created scenarios where the action is played out behind virtual prison walls. In the commercial entertainment industries, any type of intensely dramatic setting or visually compelling image is good fodder for the corporations whose primary focus is the profit potential behind any text/image. When it comes to stories about the prison-industrial complex, the mythos of danger and deviance associated with incarceration translates easily into media spectacles that are created primarily to captivate audience attention and consumer dollars while simultaneously colonizing our imaginations.

As Guy Debord wrote in 1967: "In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation" (1967, p. 42). This is an apt description of the relationship that most viewers have to the images of prisons and prisoners that appear on our screens and monitors. Indeed, because most viewers will not have experienced incarceration directly, media representations become their primary form for imagining prison. As Debord noted: "When the real world changes into simple images, simple images become real beings and effective motivations of hypnotic behavior" (1967, p. 42). As I argue below, when viewers mistake violent media spectacles for "real beings," they tend to embrace increasingly severe forms of social control such as increased surveillance, policing, and incarceration (Debord, 1967; also see Kellner, 2003).

While television news investigations of the practices of the U.S. penal system are rare, television dramatic programming is abundant with representations of crime, criminals, and the incarcerated ([Rapping, 2003](#); [Yousman, 2009](#)). My examination of popular crime dramas like *Law and Order* and *NYPD Blue*, for example, revealed that nearly 2/3rds of the episodes included incarcerated characters or those who had been recently paroled from prison. The absence of television news media coverage of incarceration, considered in tandem with a wealth of images of the incarcerated in dramatic programming, suggests that fictionalized and sensationalized versions of prisons and prisoners are most familiar to television audiences. However, the story that the television industry tells is one that is vastly different than the reality of incarceration in the U.S. For example, my research found that television dramas tend to represent prisoners as violent monsters, with murderers and rapists leading the way, but in actuality the prison boom has not been driven by the incarceration of violent criminals. The majority of prisoners have been sentenced for nonviolent offenses— usually related to the illusory “war on drugs” ([Glassner, 2010](#); [Hartnett, 1995](#); [Hartnett, 2000](#)). But as television scholars have argued (see [Gerbner and Gross, 1976](#)), violence on television is not meant to be factual so much as generically familiar: the violence must fill genre-driven requirements by creating the compelling visuals, simple dramatic conflicts, and quick resolutions that fuel the assembly line of weekly television program production. The television industry therefore relies on gruesome tales of murder and mayhem not because anyone involved thinks they are “real,” but because they facilitate the production of the formulaic and compressed narratives that attract viewer attention in an increasingly cluttered and fragmented media environment.

While the overrepresentation of violence is one key aspect of television images of prisons and prisoners, an equally significant problem is the mass media’s production of racial fantasies.

This is why numerous scholars have argued that we cannot fully understand the prison population explosion without understanding racial politics in America during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries ([Alexander, 2010](#); [Davis, 2003](#); [Giroux, 2009](#); [Mauer, 1999](#); [Miller, 1996](#)). For example, scholars have argued that because blacks and Latinos are more likely to be depicted as violent than whites, the severity of the criminal justice system and the brutal conditions inside the nation's prisons are framed as a necessary and logical response to those savage Others who threaten the racial order ([Entman and Rojecki, 2000](#); [Mauer, 1999](#); [Miller, 1996](#); [Yousman, 2009](#)). Brutal state practices are therefore legitimated through narratives that frame the punitive treatment of prisoners as both necessary and deserved. These brutalizing fictions suggest that the penal system is too lenient or soft on these dark Others, that rehabilitation is impossible, that prisoners are dangerous creatures who require severe punishment, and that, ultimately, capital punishment is the only solution. Following on media patterns that date back to the dawn of the nation ([Hartnett, 2010](#); [Stabile, 2006](#)), such media images and narratives construct the penal system as just, as a flawed but ultimately functional institution ([Cusac, 2009](#); [Meiners, 2007](#); [Rapping, 2003](#); [Yousman, 2009](#)).

My textual analysis of television crime dramas also revealed that imprisoned characters, while a regular part of the cast of prime-time crime dramas, tend to function more as plot devices than as living human beings. In most television crime dramas, the daily conditions of life in the nation's prisons are not germane to the discourse. Crime in the streets is a recurring theme in television drama and the focus of some of the most highly watched programs on television. For example, during the 2010-2011 television season, programs like *CSI*, *NCIS*, *Criminal Minds*, *The Mentalist*, and *The Closer* were all ratings leaders and they all featured dedicated law enforcement officials hunting down and capturing an endless array of murderers, rapists, and

thieves. Despite this focus on crime and punishment, the fates of those who are convicted and sentenced to prison is largely outside of the discourse. In the hundreds of hours of dramatic programming that I examined, scenes of daily life inside prisons were never represented (with the exception of two programs, discussed below). Issues such as the conditions inside the nation's prisons, the fates of those who are sentenced to them, and the ripple effect of mass incarceration on communities, are seemingly irrelevant to the obsession with crime and policing that these programs both reflect and help to construct. The invisible nature of the nation's prisons and jails held true across all of the television programming I examined with just two notable exceptions—*Oz* and *Prison Break*.

*Oz*, which debuted on HBO in 1997, was the first ongoing U.S. television program set inside a prison. TVGuide.com described the program as “a grim and graphically raw drama about life (and often death) in an experimental prison ward called Emerald City at the Oswald State Correctional Facility (nicknamed Oz).” *Oz* was well received by television critics who repeatedly praised the program for its realism. However, most of this notion of realism was based on the show's frequent portrayals of extreme violence. In its six seasons *Oz* pushed television violence to new and bizarre levels, including: prisoners burying each other alive, electrocuting one another by shoving each others' heads into television sets, dying on an electric fence, poisoning one another, repeatedly torturing and assaulting other prisoners, attempting to blow up the prison with a homemade bomb, and even being urged to murderous activity by ghostly visitations. As absurd as some of those scenarios are, the overall tone of *Oz* is also at odds with the reality of life in America's maximum-security institutions. On *Oz*, prisoners wander the hallways and recreation areas of the prison at will, with little surveillance or intervention by the guards. They blithely commit havoc over and over again with almost no

consequences. In actuality, prisoners in the most severe facilities, like those that *Oz* is supposed to represent, spend most of their time, as much as 23 hours a day, alone, locked inside their cells (Abramsky, 2007). *Oz*'s purported "realism" is therefore not only fictional, but fictional in ways that reproduce the worst stereotypes about prisons and prisoners.

The notion that *Oz* presents viewers with a "real" peek into the nation's prisons is thus completely absurd. On one level this is understandable, for television fictions are just that—fiction. Yet HBO works very hard to suggest that its programming is different. One of their prominent marketing slogans is "It's not TV: It's HBO." "Reality" has become a key marketing strategy throughout the television industry; ranging from the wild popularity of so-called reality television programs, to the "Ripped from the Headlines" slogans attached to crime dramas like *Law and Order*, to the emphasis in HBO programs of a gritty sort of look at the underbelly of American culture on programs like *The Sopranos*, *Boardwalk Empire*, and *Oz*. Yet so often in these programs what is considered "real" is simply extreme violence. As Gerbner and his colleagues have argued since the 1960s, this construction of constant violence as a "real" part of everyday existence has debilitating consequences for our social world, for it cultivates mistrust, fear of others, and a willingness to submit to increasingly severe measures of social control.

*Oz*'s use of terror as a commodity, a way to draw viewers to the program's hyperviolent brand image, is therefore politically significant, as viewers who have few counter-narratives to draw on may construct their imagination of prisons and prisoners from programs like this, the numerous Hollywood films that represent prisoners in a similar hyperviolent fashion, or the popular Fox television program, *Prison Break*, that followed in the wake of *Oz*. *Prison Break* debuted on the Fox network in 2005, becoming only the second U.S. television drama to focus primarily on incarcerated characters as the central protagonists. *Prison Break*, like *Oz*, was both

a critical and popular success. Unlike *Oz*, *Prison Break* included many subplots that occurred outside of the prison, yet it also shares many characteristics with the earlier program, including supposed “behind the scenes” glimpses into prison life, bizarre plot twists, unlikely scenarios, characterizations of prisoners as savage (often psychopathic) deviants, and an extremely high degree of violence, often leading to death. As Meiners (2007) has written, programs like *Prison Break* are media spectacles constructed from a Manichean world-view, pitting a few innocent heroes against hordes of inherently dangerous and bad prisoners. Meiners asks us to question this construction through a bit of self-reflection:

And, as we jaywalk, or cheat on taxes, or download songs for free from the Internet, or lie to the boss, or “borrow” paper from the photocopier at work for personal use, or use a variety of legal and illegal drugs, and more, what precisely does this category *innocent* mean? Invoking it is worrisome as it reifies an identity that is not possible, yet fictions still persist. Innocence also exists in a legal and cultural landscape where what is defined as a crime has been, and continues to be, explicitly racialized (2007, p. 179).

Meiners’ questions illustrate how the line between innocence and guilt is not as clearly defined as programs like *Prison Break* suggest. In fact, [Bohm \(1986\)](#) argues that as many as 90% of Americans have committed some type of legal offense for which they could have been, might have been, incarcerated. Yet on television those in prison are defined as alien, completely and totally unlike Us, the innocent viewers. Programs like *Oz* and *Prison Break* fill our homes with images of prisoners (very often black or brown men) as sadistic monsters who are not completely controlled even by today’s severe maximum-security institutions. If this is the case, if these creatures are so unlike us, so alien and dangerous, then we must become even more punitive, even more repressive in our approach to criminal justice. Even more policing and surveillance is necessary, even more prisons, even harsher prison environments and sentencing policies; this is all deemed necessary by these narratives of terror.

As Meiners (2007) points out, crime-related fear is often based on an underlying relationship to racial unease as well, and this is certainly true in both television news and television fictions. To explore this claim, consider the case of England's late-1970's panic over "mugging." As argued in Stuart Hall's landmark text, *Policing the Crisis* (Hall, et al. 1978), England's news media created the new label of "mugging" to describe street robberies, thus triggering a panic over an imagined crime wave that reflected deep-seated racial fears and anxieties caused by the shifting of long-standing cultural norms in post-imperial England. Hall and his co-authors contend that the crisis that needed to be policed in 1970s Great Britain was not the imagined spike in "muggings" in the streets, but the social pressures that followed from an influx of large numbers of immigrants, the "darkening" of the British population, and the declining economic conditions of the white working and middle-classes. "Mugging" was not an actual legal category of crime that had previously existed, but a media/political construction, a peg on which the coat of law and order could be hung, and a rallying cry that provided legitimation for repressive policing and the erosion of civil liberties. "Mugger" became a code word for Black youth—the "folk devils" that were the scapegoats for the anxieties of a nation in transition. As Hall and his coauthors argue:

The Folk Devil—on to whom all our most intense feelings about things going wrong, and all our fears about what might undermine our fragile securities are projected-- is... a sort of alter ego for Virtue. In one sense, the Folk Devil comes up at us unexpectedly, out of the darkness, out of nowhere. In another sense, he is all too familiar; we know him already, before he appears. He is the reverse image, the alternative to all we know: *the negation*. . . . The "mugger" was such a Folk Devil; his form and shape accurately reflected the content of the fears and anxieties of those who first imagined, and then actually discovered him: young, black, bred in, or arising from the 'breakdown of social order' in the city; threatening the traditional peace of the streets, the security of movement of the ordinary respectable citizen (1978, p. 161, emphasis in the original).

The British-based "folk devils" created by the mugging craze sound strikingly similar to those racist tropes that have driven U.S. crime policy since the end of the Civil War. Indeed,

research has shown that many Americans associate blackness with criminality (Gilliam and Iyengar, 2000), and that the “black image in the white mind,” as Fredrickson (1971), put it, is one marked by fear and trepidation. As Alexander (2010), Entman and Rojecki (2000), Giroux (2009), Hartnett (2010), Mauer (1999), Miller (1996), Stabile (2006), West (1994), and many others have documented, in the U.S. men of color have long been depicted as threats to the social order by politicians, representatives of the criminal justice system, and media storytellers and pundits. The image of a scary black or brown man is frequently used as shorthand for those seeking to consolidate their power, as in the infamous “Willie Horton” political advertisements that helped George H.W. Bush defeat his Democratic opponent in the 1988 presidential election by insinuating that Michael Dukakis favored letting black murders roam the streets while on parole from prison (Jamieson, 1993).

While it was not solely men of color who were portrayed as violent in the programming I examined, television’s racial representations must be situated in the larger historical context of mass mediated representations of blacks and Latinos. The construction of violent black and Latino masculinity in the news, on *Oz* and *Prison Break*, and in other dramatic programs, is part of a long tradition in U.S. film and television that has articulated darkness with savagery, dating back almost a century to D.W. Griffith’s notorious celebration of the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in *Birth of a Nation* (1915), and continuing on to the overrepresentation of black criminals on television news, the drug dealers and thugs that inhabited the “blaxploitation” films of the 1970s and their ancestors in urban films of subsequent decades, the villainous figures on television cop shows (including so-called “reality” programs), the gun-toting menaces in “gangsta” rap videos, and the dark monsters that roam the hallways of *Oz*. Indeed, the histories of U.S. media and U.S. racism align very closely, and it often seems that the cultivation of racial fear is one of the most

consistent characteristics of U.S. electronic media since Edison first began tinkering with moving images (Stabile, 2006).

*Other Stories, Other Storytellers: Perspectives of Dissent and Acceptance*

Television may be the central storyteller in American culture (Morgan, Shanahan, and Signorielli, 2009), but it is not the only potential source of stories about incarceration, for those who have lived in America's prisons and jails also have stories to tell. Thus, in addition to my critical readings of television representations of incarceration, I have spent time speaking with people who have been incarcerated. I asked them to discuss their own experiences in prisons and their thoughts on film and television representations of prisons and prisoners.

It is often difficult for researchers to gain access to incarcerated men and women. However, I was able to locate a community day program that aids ex-prisoners with their transition back into free society, and they allowed me to interview any of their clients who were willing to speak to me. While the twenty-five men and one woman who volunteered to participate in my focus group interviews do not constitute a scientific, randomly selected sample, they do represent a range of prison experiences in terms of the institutions they were imprisoned in and the lengths of sentence they served. In addition, the racial distribution of my volunteers was similar to that of America's prison population: twelve blacks, nine Latinos, and five whites. Their ages also matched the general parameters of most prisoners, ranging from early twenties to early fifties. Meeting in small groups in a conference room at the transitional day program, I asked them to describe their daily routines while incarcerated and their relationships with other prisoners and prison staff. Specific questions focused on concrete situations related to the prison experience: sexual relationships, friendship, violence, privacy, punishment, race relations, drugs, visitation, work, education, recreation and leisure, food, sleep, hygiene, health, safety, and

therapeutic and rehabilitative programs. I focused on these topics because much of the vast literature about life in America's prisons, created by historians, sociologists, communication scholars, prisoners, and those educators and activists who work closely with them, has identified these issues as central to the lives of prisoners (for just a small taste of this abundant literature see: Abu-Jamal, 1995; Burton-Rose, 1998; Cleaver, 1968; [Conover, 2000](#); Davis, 2005; Girshick, 1999; Jackson, 1970; Leder, 2000; Prejean, 1993; Rideau and Wikberg, 1992; X and Haley, 1964). Finally, I showed the volunteers a short video clip taken from the program *Oz* and asked them in open and general terms what they thought of it.

The stories these ex-prisoners told were different from the stories I had found in television representations of incarceration. For instance, they described institutions that are much more repressive than those depicted on U.S. television, marked by close supervision and surveillance, limited freedom of movement, and strict daily routines. While they did speak of some violence they encountered in prison, they also tended to refute the hyperviolent construction of prisoners suggested by television. Television focuses on rape, murder, and riots, suggesting that these extreme incidents are routine and inevitable due to the natural sadism and brutality of the incarcerated; in contrast, the people I spoke with provided insights into how prisons and jails *as institutions* encourage rather than discourage violence, are founded in violent principles, and operate based on punitive and violent practices. These perspectives on the relationship between incarceration and violence are consistent with the findings of many sociologists and other scholars who have written extensively about the dehumanizing effects of the prison-industrial complex (see, among others, Abramsky, 2002; [Alexander, 2010](#); Austin and Irwin, 2001; Burton-Rose, 1998; [Conover, 2000](#); Davis, 2003; Davis, 2005; Girshick, 1999; Hartnett, 2010; Irwin, 2005; [Parenti, 2008](#); Scraton and McCulloch, 2009; [Wacquant, 2009](#)).

The ex-prisoners I spoke with also discussed many issues and concerns that were not included in the television narrative of incarceration. They talked about the sorry state of nutritional and health care services behind bars, and the extremely limited and underfunded educational and vocational programs available to most prisoners. Other issues such as abusive treatment by corrections staff, the lack of employment opportunities for ex-prisoners, the plight of women in prison, problems caused when prisoners convicted for violent and nonviolent offenses are housed together, and the generally inadequate and often inhumane living conditions in most facilities, came up spontaneously as we talked, yet my textual analysis of both news and dramatic programming had found that these issues are simply not a part of the television discourse about prisons and prisoners (see Abramsky, 2002; Austin and Irwin, 2001; Burton-Rose, 1998; [Conover, 2000](#); Davis, 2003; Davis, 2005; Girshick, 1999; Irwin, 2005; and [Parenti, 2008](#), among others, for analysis of the conditions inside U.S. prisons). Thus, the two sets of stories that I examined, stories told by the television industry and stories told by those who have actually lived inside America's prisons and jails, provided very different perspectives on incarceration in the U.S. The television story of incarceration is one of a common sense response to the dangerous savages that threaten our safety, while the stories and experiences of the individuals I spoke with refute this narrative and offer a counter-narrative of prisons as punitive, dehumanizing, and ultimately ineffective institutions.

Despite their telling personal life stories that challenged television's representation of incarceration, my volunteers expressed deep involvement with, and belief in, media images of prisons and prisoners. Toward the end of the interview process, we watched a clip from *Oz* and there was general acceptance of the veracity of *Oz*'s representation of incarceration. Even more important, throughout the interviews ex-prisoners frequently brought up other prison-related

films and television shows they had seen. These references to mass mediated images often occurred during discussions of their own personal experiences. Even when I had made no reference to television or film at all, respondents invoked media stories when discussing prison life. And I had been very careful not to mention media myself until the end of the interviews when we watched the clip from *Oz*. In short, even those viewers whose life experiences were full of first-hand stories and images of life in prison resorted to mass media representations to make sense of their lives.

These findings mirror the research of Van de Bulck and Vandebosch, who noted in a study of Flemish prisoner responses to media images of incarceration, that

the expectations of most of the inmates on entering the system were mainly based on television and movie images of prisons in the United States. They realized where they got their information from. They made explicit references to American audiovisual fiction. From it, they seemed to have been led to expect that the majority of inmates would be convicted of very serious crimes, that the experienced inmates would subject newcomers to an initiation ritual and that rape and violence were part of the daily fare of prison life (2003, p. 108).

Such media-fueled fears surfaced as well in Angela Davis's work with women in Cuban prisons. Davis (2003) notes that most of the women she interviewed said that their prior knowledge of prison life had come from Hollywood films. During my interviews, as was true of the findings of Davis and Van de Bulck and Vandebosch, ex-prisoners frequently combined media fantasies with real world experiences, even when I had asked questions specifically about what they themselves had witnessed in prison. For example, Antoine and Miguel (all names used are pseudonyms) engaged in this dialogue after being asked about whether they had seen stabbings while in prison:

Antoine: Like I said the only one was... the one I was telling you about earlier, about the guy with the TV, they were trying to bust him and stabbed him on his head.

Miguel: It's like they flush you down the toilet if they want to...

Interviewer: They what?

Miguel: They had a movie just like that. They'll cut you in half, then into little pieces. That shit happens in Puerto Rico.

Antoine: That's the Puerto Rican jail. That's one jail you do not want to go to. I saw a documentary on that... I was watching the Discovery Channel... they showed this documentary on... the Puerto Rican prison... there ain't no COs [corrections officers]. It's like that *Escape from New York* shit. They just throw you in there... there ain't no COs... like he said, they will hack you up into pieces.

This was a significant exchange, as Antoine and Miguel slid into a discussion of media stories, both fiction and nonfiction, even though I had specifically asked them to discuss their own experiences. Antoine refers to both a television documentary and a Hollywood science fiction film about a futuristic prison. So although Antoine said he had only witnessed one stabbing while imprisoned, and Miguel referred to no violent personal experiences at all, they quickly turned a discussion about their lives into a replaying of extremely violent images that could have come straight from *Oz*.

In another interview, ex-prisoners began discussing the film *Lockdown*, even though I had asked them to describe their own experiences with corrections officers: "Mike: You seen *Lockdown*? You see how the dude dropped the weights on his chest and broke his arm? And stuff like that can happen. That's why they tried to take the dead weights out of jails now. That can easily happen. That whole room is nothing but metal." Mike had started this discussion by saying that a scene from *Oz*, where prisoners were left unsupervised in a weight room, is unlikely to happen in real prisons. Yet he ended up contradicting himself when he invoked another media

narrative. Mike's memory of his own life was thus complicated by images from the mass media, which, in this case, appear to have overpowered his personal experiences of life in prison.

To demonstrate this alarming point in more detail, consider the following example of how closely some prisoners identify with media images:

Ray: I've watched *Woods*—the movie *Woods*—last week. You saw it right, Norm? It's about a prison, and this guy... was an artist, and at first he was a drug dealer out in the street, and he got in jail... and he became an artist. He met this other prisoner, but the prisoner... was a white guy, but he was a nervous white guy, so his mother had money, so she owned an art gallery, so he painted the whole story since he been down, and all these COs... they were sending him to work in a factory, with asbestos, he was getting... cancer... and so he found out about it, and he started drawing all this stuff and he told the guy all I want you to do is when your mother comes was to have her put this stuff in her art gallery. So they planned to escape. So the white dude was going to help him escape... he backed out at the last moment. So he let him go... So they escaped, and one of the guys stabbed the guy... The last day that they were going to escape he killed the guy that cut him, while they were escaping. Stabbed him up. So the other guy, he died, his friend, not the guy that stabbed him but his other friend... the police shot him because he didn't want to stay alive cause everybody else escaped, except him, the one that mapped the plan... He charged the fence with a screwdriver, and they blasted him, and that's how it ended. His whole life story in jail was the art gallery and people were looking at it... That was a good movie. *Woods*.

This was a lively conversation, with Ray and the other men showing excitement about the particulars of the film and the fate of the characters. Toward the end of his recounting of the film,

Ray was obviously emotionally moved by the story. During his long description he seemed to almost lose sight of the fact that he was talking about a film and not a real event that he had experienced or real people that he had personally known.

Psychological research on audience relationships with media figures has labeled this tendency as “parasocial” ([Horton and Wohl, 1956](#)). This is the phenomenon, often associated with fans of soap operas, for viewers to so closely identify with the characters that appear in media stories that they speak of them much as they would speak of family members, close friends, or colleagues. As Horton and Wohl observed decades ago:

One of the striking characteristics of the new mass media - radio, television, and the movies - is that they give the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer. The conditions of response to the performer are analogous to those in a primary group. The most remote and illustrious men are met *as if they* were in the circle of one's peers; the same is true of a character in a story who comes to life in these media in an especially vivid and arresting way. We propose to call this seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer a *para-social relationship* (1956, p. 215).

As the examples discussed above demonstrate, these parasocial tendencies were apparent in how my volunteers spoke about the incarcerated characters in the films and television shows they had seen. The fact that media images of prison life were influential in shaping the respondents’ perceptions of even their own prison experiences should be alarming to activists, educators, and media critics. Indeed, if prisoners’ expectations of and memories about prison life are so heavily influenced by their exposure to television stories about incarceration, then we should not be surprised that viewers with no personal experience of the prison system are susceptible to mass mediated images that push the kinds of extreme narratives and images that make mass incarceration seem like a necessary response to a world of monsters.

*Responding: Questioning, Resisting, Working for Change*

While media images and narratives are influential in shaping the public imagination, they are not all-powerful. Research into the effects of television, for example, has shown that viewers do not entirely embrace in any direct or simple way the implications of the stories they watch. Viewers can question and resist the distorted picture of incarceration that I have discussed here, and they can work to change the media system that perpetuates these misleading images. In this concluding section I discuss three ways that concerned citizens can work to break the hold that the media industries have over our perception of mass incarceration in the U.S.: I focus on media literacy education and the related projects of media activism and alternative media.

While there is much debate among media educators about precisely what media literacy entails (see Yousman, 2008), scholars working in the critical tradition have advocated for an approach to media literacy that does not shy away from questions of power and ideology. Fully understanding the relationship between mass media and mass incarceration thus requires knowledge about the political economy of the media (concentrated corporate ownership, intense profit-orientation, etc.), the social impact of media consumption (media influence on individuals and society, the shaping of perceptions and ideologies), and the activist and alternative movements that are challenging mainstream media norms and practices. As Jhally and Lewis (1998) note, “Media literacy, in short, is about more than the analysis of messages, it is about an awareness of why those messages are there. It is not enough to know that they are produced, or even how, in a technical sense, they are produced. To appreciate the significance of contemporary media, we need to know why they are produced, under what constraints and conditions, and by whom” (p. 111).

This conceptualization of critical media literacy is also advanced by Sholle and Denski (1995) who contend that “Media literacy is not a practice that takes place in isolation. In order to

understand the media, one's self, one's relation to it, one must be able to speak (with a voice) and be able to recognize who is speaking in the media and who is not speaking" (p. 27). In the case of media and mass incarceration, my analysis suggests those who have been allowed to speak are primarily apologists, defenders, and engineers of a punitive system of perverted criminal justice that has successfully transformed notions of social justice and a war on poverty into imperatives of social control and war on the poor. Those who are *not* allowed to speak are dissenters from this system and the victims of these trends— the millions of American citizens who are under the control of the prison-industrial complex.

The type of media education that is needed to challenge the connections between mass media and mass incarceration is one that empowers people to ask critical questions about: (1) who controls the dominant media industries, (2) the nature of mainstream media images and stories, (3) the social consequences of living in a culture saturated by commercial media, (4) and how people can resist the vast power of the commercial media industries. When it comes to the relationship between mass media and mass incarceration asking these sorts of questions is an essential first step in challenging the dominance of the prison-industrial complex. Thus, I will now very briefly touch on each of these issues while offering some suggestions for further reading for those who wish to explore these questions in more depth.

(1) Who controls the dominant media industries? A political-economic approach to understanding contemporary media focuses on issues of corporate concentration, conglomeration, and commercialism in the media industries and the relationships between these industries and other powerful corporate and governmental institutions. The vast majority of the media content that people around the globe watch, read, and listen to is produced by a small and concentrated group of multinational conglomerates, such as Disney, Time Warner, Viacom,

General Electric, and the News Corporation. These corporations value profit above all other considerations, and together they control what sorts of stories and images are widely promoted and distributed and what sorts of stories and images are neglected or completely ignored (For further reading see: Bagdikian, 2004; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 1999; McChesney, 2004; Meehan, 2005; Huff, Phillips and Project Censored, 2010; Schiller, 1989; Schiller, 1996; [Wasko, 2001](#)). As Herman and Chomsky (1988) have argued, corporate control of the media industries ensures that most of the stories we have access to amount to little more than propaganda for capitalism, and legitimation of the abuses wrought by a system of greed and hyperindividualistic self-interest. Which brings us to our second question...

(2) What is the nature of the media content produced and distributed by these giant corporations? Media images and stories, of course, are varied and sometimes quite diverse. However, media scholars have also uncovered consistent and recurring patterns of stereotypical representations that are sexist, racist, homophobic, nationalist, ethnocentric, and demeaning of the poor. Dissenting and radical perspectives that challenge the status quo, or that raise critical questions about social structures, are usually ridiculed or ignored in mainstream media. As Herman and Chomsky write about those who are allowed to shape and define the news: “In the media, as in other major institutions, those who do not display the requisite values and perspectives will be regarded as ‘irresponsible,’ ‘ideological,’ or otherwise aberrant, and will tend to fall by the wayside” (1988, p. 304). Meanwhile, the most consistent message is a celebration of conformity, hyperconsumption, and material acquisition (For further reading see: Butsch, 2011; Dixon, 2010; Douglas, 1995; [Entman and Rojecki, 2000](#); [Gross, 2001](#); Hall, 2011; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; hooks, 1992; Katz, 2011; Kellner, 2003; Kilbourne, 1999; Parenti, 1992; [Parenti, 1993](#); Said, 1978; Schor, 2004; Wilson, Gutierrez, and Chao, 2003). Overall, the

tendency in mainstream media is just that... mainstreaming. By mainstreaming I mean a narrowing of the range of acceptable discourse, a shutting down of alternative or dissenting perspectives, and a marginalization of those who do not fit neatly into the ideological boxes constructed by the commercial media industries (also see Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli, 1982, on mainstreaming and cultivation). Thus, we must ask a third question...

(3) What are the social consequences of growing up and living in a culture dominated by the commercial media industries? Since the 1930s, there has been a tremendous amount of research into the social impact of mass media. The results of this research have been varied and sometimes contradictory, but certain patterns have been established, such as the tendency for high exposure to violent content to desensitize individuals to the consequences of violence and to make us more fearful of others, the ability of the mass media to set the agenda for what the public deems important and worthy of attention, the tendency for media stereotypes to influence our perceptions and beliefs about people who are not like us, and the detrimental effects of distorted images of beauty on young women's self-esteem and health, to name just a few (For further reading see: [Bryant and Oliver, 2009](#); [Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli, 2002](#); [Jhally and Lewis, 1992](#); [McCombs and Shaw, 1972](#); [Pipher, 1994](#); [Postman, 1985](#); [Shanahan and Morgan, 1999](#); [Wolf, 1991](#)). The commercial media industries have in fact amassed enormous profits by making us feel isolated from one another, anxious, unworthy, and, ultimately, very afraid. Alienated from other people, we thus turn to the myriad products that the consumer society dangles in front of us with promises of fulfillment and salvation. Our last question, then, is crucial...

(4) How can people work to change and resist the dominance of the commercial media industries? A critical media literacy approach emphasizes that we do not have to be passive

consumers and recipients of media messages. People can and do educate themselves about media, challenge the dominant media industries, work for media reform, and create and consume alternative media outside of the commercial sphere. The rest of this essay focuses on a number of organizations that can provide resources and support for citizens who are fighting back against the abuses of the mainstream media through the three key projects of media education, media activism and reform, and alternative media (For further reading see: Atton, 2002; Duncombe, 1997; Lasn, 1999; McChesney, 2008; Newman and Scott, 2005).

So, for those who are interested in learning more about critical media literacy, and spreading that knowledge to others, there are several places to start, including valuable websites such as the one sponsored by the Action Coalition for Media Education (ACME; [www.acmecoalition.org](http://www.acmecoalition.org)). Unlike other media literacy organizations, ACME eschews corporate funding because they recognize that a true project of media education must be fully independent from corporate influence. On their website, ACME describes their activities in this way: “Using a wide variety of multimedia curricula and resources, ACME helps individuals and organizations gain the skills and knowledge to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce media in a wide variety of forms.” ACME’s website offers a rich compendium of materials about media and media education, a blog, short videos, curricular materials for educators, and more.

ACME’s vision of media education is linked with media activism focused on changing the media industries’ priorities and practices. The primary force behind the growing media reform movement is the nonprofit organization, Free Press ([www.freepress.net](http://www.freepress.net)). On their website Free Press provide a succinct description of their mission: “Free Press is a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization working to reform the media. Through education, organizing and advocacy, we promote diverse and independent media ownership, strong public media, quality

journalism, and universal access to communications.” Free Press is dedicated to changing the corporate media system through lobbying government and educating citizens about media policies regarding concentration of ownership, commercialism, diversity, and access, Free Press works to create a more open and equitable media system. Every two years Free Press sponsors a National Conference for Media Reform that brings together activists, educators, organizers, media professionals, and citizens to network and debate key issues in confronting the commercial media system. One key area that Free Press focuses on is the relationship between media and civil rights, clearly central to the issues of mass media fueling mass incarceration that I have explored in this chapter.

The media reform movement led by Free Press also works toward the creation and support of nonprofit media that can provide readers, listeners, and viewers with alternatives to the distortions of the mainstream commercial media. The Media Education Foundation (MEF; [www.mediaed.org](http://www.mediaed.org)), for example, is a leading source of documentary films that focus on media and culture and the debilitating effects of the commercial media system. MEF’s slogan, “Challenging Media” has a dual meaning, as MEF’s goal is to challenge the mainstream media culture that promotes racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, consumerism, and violence, and to do so by producing and distributing challenging media of their own in the form of documentary films, study guides, and other valuable media literacy resources. Similarly, Paper Tiger TV Television (<http://papertiger.org>) and California Newsreel (<http://newsreel.org>) are nonprofit producers and distributors of alternative documentary films by diverse grassroots filmmakers unaffiliated with the mainstream media industries. Their many films focus on issues of race, gender, class, inequality, resistance movements, and social justice, and they offer a vision of the world that is very different than the one sold to us by the commercial media system.

Focusing on alternative media and information about incarceration is the Real Cost of Prisons Project (RCPP; [www.realcostofprisons.org](http://www.realcostofprisons.org)), where you can find links to books, videos, and comics, as well as writing and music created by prisoners. RCPP's website functions as a valuable clearinghouse of alternative media that challenges the prison industrial complex. For people who want to educate themselves about what is really going on in the nation's prisons and jails and the causes and consequences of mass incarceration, RCPP is a great place to start looking for resources. Internet explorers who are concerned about these issues can also discover dozens of documentary films about the prison industrial complex that offer very different stories and images than those found in commercial television fictions. A YouTube or GoogleVideo search for "documentaries on incarceration" is a useful start for encountering many different perspectives (admittedly of widely varying quality) on the issues explored in this anthology.

This is a small sample of the wealth of alternative media available for citizens, educators, and activists who are seeking information, images, and stories that challenge the myths promulgated by the mainstream television and film industries. The triad of media education, media activism, and alternative media can offer us a way out of the maze of distortions and delusions perpetuated by commercial media giants who are more interested in spectacular images of fear and violence than in telling real and insightful stories about what is truly an American tragedy.

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