More Important than Guns or Grog: The Role of Television for the Health and Wellbeing of Australian Aboriginal Prisoners

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Abstract

This article examines the provision of television in the South Australian prison system and its importance to the identity, health, wellbeing and ontological security of Aboriginal prisoners. Existing research has explored the use of broadcast and print media by prisoners in the United Kingdom, United States and Europe and has established that television has an impact on incarcerated audiences far beyond its role as an 'electronic babysitter' or a means of filling time. It is also recognised that television plays a significant role in the lives of Aboriginal people (Michaels 1986). However, little is known about television in relation to incarcerated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. This article draws on data concerning in-cell television ('TV') among Aboriginal men in prison,[1] which found that, when asked to identify the most important factors in the prison environment, 87 per cent of participants identified access to in-cell television as the single most important factor contributing to their congruency with prison accommodation. The article further indicates that access to in-cell television has the potential to reduce incidents of suicide and self-harm and should be adopted as a 'best-practice' principle for Aboriginal prisoners in Australian correctional environments.

Introduction

The role and importance of television for incarcerated audiences has been investigated by a number of authors, largely in relation to prisons in the United Kingdom ('UK') (Hagell and Newburn 1994; Jewkes 2002a, 2002b, 2007; Knight 2005) and the United States ('US') (Lindlof 1987; Johnson 2005), although studies have also been carried out in Belgium (Vandebosch 2000, 2001, 2005). While different in purpose, methodological approach, prison populations studied, and theoretical orientation, these studies collectively provide an understanding of the significance of television in prison that far exceeds what is commonly

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[1] The participants in this study included only Aboriginal men. The accepted terminology for Indigenous peoples of Australia is 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people'. Where Torres Strait Islander people are included in the discussion (for example, in national statistics), this terminology has been used.

assumed about its role in everyday life, and they offer a largely positive reading of television in prison that is in contrast to popular conceptions of its role and influence. For example, in the first in-depth qualitative analysis of in-cell TV in prisons in the UK, Jewkes found that personal television sets had a number of impacts and benefits within prison, providing:

> a key source of empowerment for the confined, offering a range of material from which they create new identities or maintain pre-existing identities, explore their inner selves, form sub-gangs based on collective findings and find autonomy and self-respect in otherwise humiliating and dis-identifying circumstances (Jewkes 2002:205).

Vandebosch (2005) further found evidence that access to television in custody allows prisoners to stay in touch with life beyond the prison walls and aids individuals' re-entry into society at the end of their sentences.

The aim of this article is to discuss the importance of television to Aboriginal people in prison within the context of highly prescriptive and discriminatory regulations regarding ownership and access. The reasons for focusing on Aboriginal prisoners' relationships with in-cell TV are three-fold. First, Indigenous communities historically have been subjected to disproportionate and discriminatory levels of criminalisation and marginalisation and Grant (the first author) has a particular interest in how these disadvantages impact on the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples within the criminal justice system. The study of prison television emerged from the first empirical research program investigating the needs of Indigenous people in custody and the extent to which these needs are being met through various aspects of environment, including prison architecture, design, space and services (Grant 2008, 2009; Grant and Memmott 2007). This work is conducted within a theoretical framework where preferences for particular environments are partly interpreted in terms of stress reduction and where incompetently designed environments may lead the users to experience high degrees of stress and ontological insecurity. The second author, Jewkes, has written extensively on media in English prisons, including about the introduction of in-cell television (Jewkes 2002a, 2002b, 2006, 2007, 2008) so, for the purpose of this article, where comparative discussions are useful, they will be confined to comparisons between Australia and England.

Second, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are significantly over-represented in the Australian prison system and correctional agencies across the country are grappling with ways successfully to accommodate this potentially vulnerable group in secure but humane conditions. To put it into context, while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples comprise 2.5 per cent of the total Australian population, 26 per cent of the Australian prison population identifies as either Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men in prison account for 1155.2 per 100 000 of the prison population, compared to an overall rate for men in prison of 105.4 per 100 000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011).[2] Given this over-representation, there is no reason to believe that the 'pains of imprisonment' (Sykes 1958) associated with a custodial sentence affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners any less than other prisoners; indeed, research has found that custodial environments antithetical to the needs of Aboriginal peoples result in increased feelings of despair, hopelessness, isolation and other adverse psychological effects, including an increased risk of self-harm and suicide (Reser

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[2]   The study focused solely on men's prisons. However, it should be noted that Aboriginal women are the most rapidly increasing group in the prison system (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner 2002) and very little is known about their needs. Similarly, Aboriginal juveniles in custody are an under-researched group.

1989; Grant and Memmott 2007; Grant 2009). Creating carceral spaces that are congruent with the needs of Aboriginal prisoners and 'normalised' as far as is possible in secure conditions is therefore imperative if psychological survival is to be successfully negotiated. This article is predicated on the belief that one crucial aspect of the normalisation of the custodial environment, and a key factor in the mitigation of feelings of loss and deprivation, is access to media; in particular, individual access to the medium of greatest penetration in the population as a whole: television (Jewkes 2002).

The third reason for focusing on this particular incarcerated audience is that Aboriginal people not only bring to custody a distinctive set of group norms, values and beliefs, but also have an unusually strong relationship with television as a medium that both reinforces their unique cultural identities and connects them to the wider society. In some remote Aboriginal communities in the 'free community' in Australia, the introduction of television over the last three decades has been described as a force 'potential[ly] greater than guns or grog' (Michaels 1986:74). The introduction of television to these previously insular worlds provided connections to the outside world never experienced before. Within short spaces of time, television became the prime form of recreation and there were major changes in behaviours and cultural norms in communities. Recognising the impacts on the cultures and understanding the importance of the television as a method of communication, by the 1970s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people became increasingly engaged in developing visual media forms to a range of expressive and political purposes. Their efforts to develop new forms of Indigenous media were motivated by a desire to envision and strengthen a 'cultural future' (Ginsberg 1994). These factors, which contribute to the importance Aboriginal prisoners attach to television, led to us anticipate that television viewing might be a strategy for coping with and adapting to custody, and may contribute to Aboriginal prisoners' sense of self and community.

The role and importance of in-cell television in prisons

The role of television in society at large remains contested. Despite 99 per cent of households in the UK, Australia and the US having at least one television set and TV viewing remaining a staple part of most people's lives, an enduring anti-television sentiment pervades cultural life, and notions of the television industry pandering to the 'lowest common denominator' of public taste remain in circulation. As Knight observed, television is frequently constructed (including, somewhat ironically, by media institutions themselves) as a 'corruptive medium which makes audiences passive, idle [and] sedated, the "plug-in drug" leading to moral and social deviance' (Knight 2005:29). It is this 'preferred reading' (Hall 1980) that frames news stories about the perceived dangers of unregulated television and internet[3] content by newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* in the UK and the *Advertiser* in South Australia. Concerns are commonly directed at individuals deemed incapable of making the 'right' choices about what they consume: children whose viewing goes unpoliced by their parents, individuals defined as 'sexual deviants' who use media to fuel their perverse desires; and prisoners viewed as 'social inadequates' who risk being corrupted by certain types of material, such as particularly violent or pornographic content.

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[3] Internet access for prisoners is a more thorny political issue than in-cell television. While use of computers is permitted in many prisons in both the UK and Australia, access tends to be confined to prison education departments, where use can be carefully monitored. Web access is rare in these countries (unlike many parts of Europe) because of the perceived problems associated with security (see Jewkes 2008 for an overview).

Echoes of both mass society theory and positivism can be detected in most of these discourses where there lingers a notion of an inferior class hampered by some degree of mental deficiency that precludes members of it from being able to distinguish between media images and real life. Such class-edged bias informs a brand of populist punitiveness that drives policy and legislation in the name of 'protecting' vulnerable audiences considered potentially irresponsible in their viewing choices. Fears concerning undiscriminating and undeserving consumers of media thus dovetail neatly with deeply rooted cultural biases against identified outgroups. Indeed, these arguments may carry even greater weight in relation to those prisoners whose position as 'others' or outsiders in a society goes beyond their status as prison inmates, for example, because of the particular type of offence they have committed or because of their race/ethnicity. In both these respects, Aboriginal people have been regarded as particularly 'at risk' from broadcast material.

In recent years, there have been several federal government initiatives directed at some of the most salient problems within Indigenous communities in Australia, which include crimes of violence and sexual assault against women (Atkinson 1999), child sexual abuse (Sutton 2009) and substance abuse (including high levels of petrol sniffing among Aboriginal youths (Brady 1992)). For example, the Northern Territory Federal Government established a Board of Inquiry that released a report in 2007 linking alcohol and a lack of education to the high rates of domestic violence and sexual abuse against children within some Aboriginal communities (Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse 2007). These arguments find an easy alliance with expressions of concern about television being provided to Aboriginal prisoners and, while hardcore pornography is not available in South Australian prisons, many prisons controversially allow videos and DVDs, including films containing violent and/or sexual scenes, to be broadcast. However, a causal relationship between media content and offending has not been conclusively established and, although psychological studies purporting to demonstrate a link dominate the field, it is plausible that sexual and violent material has a cathartic impact, allowing audiences to participate vicariously but harmlessly in deviant behaviour (see Jewkes 2011 for an overview of these debates).

In addition to concerns that prisoners should not be exposed to broadcast content that might legitimate or stimulate offending behaviour, there has emerged a growing belief that prisons should meet public acceptability tests. Part of this is the perception that prisoners are non-citizens who have forsaken the right to anything that might be construed by society at large as a perk or a privilege. Although in England and Australia in-cell television is used as an incentive for good behaviour and a privilege to be earned (and removed if behaviour is deemed 'non-compliant'), for many its enduring status as a luxury good precludes it from being an option for prisoners. Against this backdrop, it is of little surprise that in-cell television has always been a highly sensitive issue for politicians in England and Australia — both countries where perceived privileges for offenders have never been a vote winner. As prison population numbers rose dramatically in both countries throughout the latter decades of the 20th century, it is likely that TV's introduction into prisons (in 1997 in England and Wales and from the late 1980s in Australia[4]) came about for reasons based on economic expediency — for example, because prisoners could be locked in their cells for

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[4]   The introduction of in-cell television occurred in a haphazard manner across Australia dependent on the jurisdiction and the particular prison concerned. In most instances, in-cell television was not available until the 1990s (for example, some prisons in South Australia allowed in-cell TVs in 1990) and then only when the prisoner purchased a TV and paid for a security check. The recent introduction of digital television to Australia has forced rethinks on the provision of in-cell TVs.

longer periods and because association time could be limited, thus reducing staff costs — rather than in response to a desire to normalise the prison environment.

Like England and Wales, prison estates in Australia operate a 'graduating system' of security classification. Initially accommodated in high-security facilities, the intention is that prisoners move through a series of physical environments with decreasing levels of static security, greater levels of control over their environment and increasing degrees of 'normality' (including, ideally, access to television) at each move towards their release. Conversely, the inability of prisoners to act within the correctional system's code of behaviour results in their movement to accommodation where prisoners have less control over their environment, fewer amenities and experience greater levels of static security. In South Australia, prisoners exhibiting non-compliant behaviours are housed in management cells. Again, this is mirrored in England and Wales, where non-compliant prisoners may be accommodated in 'basic' (as opposed to 'standard' or 'enhanced') conditions, which frequently entails the withdrawal of 'incentives and earned privileges' ('IEPs'), including their television sets. Within both systems, extended periods of 'difficult-to-manage' behaviours may lead to a prisoner being segregated and denied access to any visual stimuli.

Television is widespread, but not universal, in South Australian prisons. Where prisoners do not have access to in-cell TV, most can view a television in communal areas, although during the study it was observed that many Aboriginal prisoners in high-security facilities had no access to a television. Provision and type of access are dependent on a number of factors. First, prisoner access to television in South Australia is most easily explained in terms of the security rating of the institution as described above (although at several institutions the various units operate separately and provide different accommodation types, effectively creating a number of separate prisons on the same site). The characteristics and amenities of the accommodation at each security level are not well defined. Many high-security prisons in South Australia were built in the 19th century under the principles of first-generation prison design (Zupan 1991; Tartaro 2006), with prisoners accommodated in single or 'double-bunked' cells. Most of these prisons have been redeveloped to operate under unit management, but do not have common leisure areas and provide no opportunity for high-security prisoners to view television as a group. Prisoners in all high-security prisons on normal regimes are permitted to provide their own television for in-cell use at their own expense. If they are 'double-bunked' with another prisoner, only one television is allowed per cell. Prisoners under disciplinary infraction are generally housed for short periods in segregation units and each prison also has an observation cell for 'at-risk' prisoners located alongside the segregation accommodation. Longer-term segregation or 'difficult-to-manage' prisoners are transferred to the super-maximum facility located within the largest prison in South Australia (G Division, Yatala Labour Prison). Prisoners housed in these areas could be locked in cells for periods up to 23 hours per day, and there are negligible opportunities for prisoners housed in any segregated or 'at-risk' areas in South Australia to access television.[5]

Medium-security prisons were mostly built after 1980 within the principles of unit management, with cells situated around a common area that usually contains a television set. At the time of the study, medium-security prisoners generally had opportunities to have in-cell televisions at their own expense. In this study it was observed that many prisoners who regularly viewed the television in their cells viewed the common-area television as well.

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[5]   The researcher noted one observation cell fitted with a small television high on a wall and covered by a clear polycarbonate sheet that had become opaque over time, obscuring the television. At the time of the visit, an officer reported that it was out of order.

The South Australian prison system also has a limited amount of 'cottage-style' accommodation for medium-security prisoners in which prisoners have access to a lounge area with a television (supplied by the Correctional Department), and many had televisions in their rooms at the time supplied at their own expense.

Low-security prisoners in South Australia are housed in either cottage-style or cell-block accommodation. The cell-block accommodation is generally older and has formerly served as medium or high security and subsequently been refitted (generally the high-security fittings had been removed and additional amenities added). All cottages and cell-blocks have common areas fitted with televisions (supplied by the Correctional Department). Again, many low-security prisoners have portable televisions in their rooms supplied at their own expense. The only institution to provide prisoners with television sets at the time of this study — with the result that there was a TV in every cell — was one of the two South Australian prisons housing remand prisoners, the purpose-built Adelaide Remand Centre. Here, there were no televisions in the common areas. The other facility housing remand prisoners also acted as an induction centre for recently sentenced prisoners. This facility provided a television for communal use in an association area. While prisoners were permitted to have their own portable sets for in-cell use, few actually had televisions in their cells.

Access to television in South Australian prisons changed shortly after this study. From 2010 onwards, signals to transmit television were switched from analog to digital across Australia. As analog televisions cannot receive 'free-to-air' signals without an additional tuner, the switch over to digital television was a major issue for Australian inmates, who were faced with the options of either replacing existing televisions or acquiring digital tuners. Sanity prevailed and, despite intense political opposition to providing prisoners with 'luxuries' (Australian Broadcasting Commission 2011), the South Australian government made the decision to purchase digital televisions for most cells, citing increased security (Hegarty 2011).

Method

The findings regarding Aboriginal prisoners' relationships with television emerged as a key subset of data within a broader research study conducted by Grant in 2008, which investigated factors affecting Aboriginal inmates' congruence with South Australian prison environments. Fieldwork was organised around three research interactions in which a variety of probes were used to gain data. The research participants were 55 male Aboriginal prisoners from diverse language groupings (who identified with seven Aboriginal language groups and cultures in South Australia and many more from around Australia), housed at five (of the nine) prisons in South Australia. The first meeting consisted of an individual semi-structured interview supplemented by a pro forma questionnaire, which was used to record information such as language groupings, family background, living conditions and domiciliary practices prior to incarceration, contact with family and community while in prison, sentence details, and experience and familiarity with correctional environments.

The data was coded and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences ('SPSS'). The second interaction involved a forced choice experiment employing 28 sets of photographs depicting a variety of prison settings to initiate discussions of preferences regarding accommodation and other aspects of correctional environments. The images were chosen to present some of the recurrent themes in people–environments literature, including 'territoriality', 'privacy' and 'way-finding' (Zeisel 1993). The photographic sets were also

intended to probe other specific areas of interest to the wider study, including 'communal spaces', 'amenities in cells' and 'Aboriginal spaces and places within prisons'. A third meeting was held with the same participants in which a series of exercises was conducted that were designed to explore responses to the custodial environment as it is, their design ideas, and their aspirations for the custodial built environment. The first exercise was to design a living environment that the participant would prefer as a custodial situation. After being shown a plan of a basic cell, participants were given large sheets of paper and drawing equipment and asked to design a personal prison living environment. Following this, participants were given a diagram consisting of a series of concentric ellipses representing physical separations of the prison and asked to identify facilities and services they required in custody and where they would like them located. Thus, subjects had the opportunity to identify factors that made prison environments more congruent through semi-structured interviews, visual identification, and drawing, planning and mapping exercises.

From this data, the role of television in prisons emerged as a particularly salient theme. In fact, 87 per cent of Aboriginal prisoners who took part in the study identified access to in-cell television as the single most important factor contributing to their sense of congruency with the prison environment. Further, television was identified not only as an important commodity in its own right, but it was also regarded as a conduit for several other factors contributing to congruency in the prison environment, including preference for prison environments that allowed the prisoner to stay connected to country, to maintain relationships with family and kin, to live within a specified social group, to maintain information flows; and to have privacy, safety and health needs met (see also Grant 2008, 2009).

Aboriginal prisoners′ ability to obtain an in-cell television

In England and Wales, a factor concerning in-cell television that creates tension between prisoners and the prison authorities is the ownership and cost of the sets. In brief, standard-issue television sets are rented by prisoners from the Prison Service at a cost of £1 per week, which, given that the TVs are very basic models and are bought by the Prison Service at a heavily discounted rate, is considered extortionate by many prisoners, who typically earn £7–12 per week (Jewkes 2002a). The standard of the sets is considered inferior for two main reasons: first, the sets do not have remote controls because it was thought they could easily be lost, and because they encourage users to leave the sets on standby, which, the Prison Service argued, uses electricity and increases the risk of fire (Jewkes 2002); and, second, televisions at most custodial institutions in England and Wales do not have satellite or cable provision, but are limited to terrestrial channels. Similar rental systems are in place in some jurisdictions of Australia. In South Australia, however, a different problem was identified. At the time of the study, the vast majority of prisoners supplied a television at their own expense. The socio-economic disadvantage of Indigenous Australians is well documented (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2011) and arises from a range of historical, social and economic causes. The most common way for Aboriginal prisoners to obtain a television was through their relatives, who purchased the set, delivered it to the prison and paid for a prison security check. This system caused severe hardship to many families and was completely beyond the means of some.

In the course of interviewing, it became apparent that the families of many prisoners did not have the financial means to provide a television, but nonetheless somehow found the funds. One participant stated: 'I'm one of the lucky ones; I've got my TV because my kids

brought it. I worried about whether they had enough to eat and buy it' (Narungga Man, Cadell Training Centre). Having to provide a television placed financially strained families under greater pressure and this often became a source of friction and guilt: 'I would ring my Aunty every day to tell her to get me a telly. I felt terrible having to pressure her because she is not so well but there was no-one else to ask. She is family so I knew she would look after me' (Ngarrindjeri Man, Yatala Labour Prison).

Socio-economic disadvantage is most common in rural and remote Aboriginal communities. Men from rural and remote areas of South Australia are often incarcerated in prisons over 1000 kilometres from home. For some families of these prisoners, purchasing a television, organising transport to deliver it to the prison, and paying a security clearance was well beyond their financial capacity. These prisoners and others (especially those from interstate) who did not have loved ones able to purchase a television resorted to saving up their prison allowances. One participant noted:

> I had to save $12.50 per fortnight over six months to get the $130 for a TV — it [the TV] is all I've got really. I didn't have any money to buy essentials, everyday things that you need to survive in this place, but I needed to have a TV. You would go mad without it (Pitjantjatjara Man, Yatala Labour Prison).

The difficulties of purchasing a television for in-cell use and prisoners' sacrifice of other goods and privileges in order to have a TV set were apparent to many of the prison services and outside agencies. In Yatala Labour Prison, a very small number of televisions was available for loan by Aboriginal prisoners. During the study, only one loan television was available with a waiting list of 20 people. Other Aboriginal prison support agencies also attempted to provide loan televisions. Again, demand outstripped supply, forcing prisoners to seek other solutions. For some, the only choice was to live without a television: 'I've been here two-and-a-half years and have just coped [without an in-cell television]. I can't get one and I try not to worry about it. It is pretty horrible though' (Narungga Man Yatala, Labour Prison).

The results from the wider study of prison environment found that the high-security remand centre (Adelaide Remand Centre) was the least preferred environment by Aboriginal prisoners, largely because of the negative social environment, lack of amenities and stifling environmental conditions. In particular, the lack of natural ventilation and access to external environments were concerning to Aboriginal prisoners. Despite these factors, some prisoners negotiated to remain at this prison solely because it was the only one that supplied television sets for in-cell use: 'I try to stay at the remand centre. They have TVs there. I can't get one here at Yatala, no one is out there to get one for me and I haven't got any money to buy one. TVs are really important' (Ngarrindjeri Man, Yatala Labour Prison).

While this situation has been changed by the South Australian Correctional Department's decision to supply of in-cell TVs (due to the phasing-out of analog TV), this data demonstrates the lengths Aboriginal prisoners were willing to go to have access to television. This is significant when one considers that a 'loss of privileges' or the movement to a suicide-prevention cell is likely to result in the loss of access to television and it may well be that in-cell television leads to improved behaviour simply by virtue of the threat of its absence or removal. Further research in this area may yield interesting results in correlations between access to television and other factors relating to Aboriginal people and their experience of the prison system.

The importance of television to Aboriginal prisoners

The statement that 'TVs are really important' was highlighted by many of the participants. In common with findings from other studies of in-cell television, it was regarded as a means of entertainment, a diversion from prison life, an alleviator of boredom, and a way of marking time and establishing routine. Most importantly, television was identified as a means of maintaining contact with the outside world. As one prisoner put it:

> TV is very important. I would rather have TV than anything else here. My telly keeps me in touch with what is happening on the outside. I am doing a long stretch and I want to know what is happening on the outside. With my telly I kinda know what is happening and even can work out who is coming in here from the news. Otherwise how would I know what was going on. It would be terrible to be released and not know anything of what has happened in the last 10 years (Narungga Man, Mobilong Prison).

Of course, it is not just television that facilitates external links. Visits, letter writing, telephone calls, radio and computer technologies (including email and the internet) have all been identified as potentially important ways for prisoners to maintain contact with the outside world (see Jewkes 2007 for an overview). In turn, all these forms of communication are known to support prisoners' family ties (Livingstone and Owen 2003), aid their rehabilitation (Brooks-Gordon and Bainham 2004), improve their feelings of security and wellbeing, and enhance their likelihood of reintegration on release (Haney 2001). Singularly and collectively, retaining forms of communication and connection reduces feelings of despair, hopelessness and isolation and other adverse psychological effects suffered by prisoners.

The urgent need for Aboriginal prisoners to have greater contact with external society has been identified by the Office of the Inspector of Custodial Services Western Australia (2002:10), which noted that 'in a climate of historic and continuing deprivation, where access and opportunity has been stunted, "family" has remained an unassailable constant for Aboriginal people '… losing contact with family is to lose a life line … lead[ing] to distress and trauma.' Aboriginal Elders across Australia have articulated that the path away from criminality and towards manhood is by gaining cultural knowledge (Memmott et al 1999; Grant and Memmott 2007; Grant 2008, 2009). The extent to which this can be achieved in prison is debatable, but it has been argued that 'experiences of prison need to build on the existing identity and spirituality of Indigenous inmates [and] prisoners should be released believing in their Aboriginality' (Memmott et al 1999:46).

Television may have a role to play here and could conceivably add to cultural knowledge depending on the programming. In addition, television can be combined with other media in creative initiatives that reinforce Aboriginal communication networks and Aboriginal identity. By way of example, Hinkson documents a video project introduced in Yuendumu:

> [T]he majority of videos produced at Yuendumu were of events taking place in daily life in the township, and irrespective of the video camera's presence: local sporting events, activities associated with the school and adult education, community meetings and 'public' events [with] 'message stick' videos produced to send out to other communities (Hinkson 2002:203–4).

The success of this initiative indicates that there may be opportunities to produce 'message stick'-style recordings in communities using existing resources with the end products screened to the appropriate Aboriginal prisoner audiences. Programs of this type could be extended to a two-way exchange of recordings to decrease further the social

isolation of Aboriginal prisoners. This may be a preferred method of communication, given that low literacy is a significant issue in the Indigenous prison population.

As things stand, however, our study found that the majority of Aboriginal prisoners had poor contact with the external society. Just under half of the participants (46 per cent) had received no visits while incarcerated. With home environments often plagued by economic, health and social problems, many families of prisoners did not have the capacity or resources to visit. Families of Aboriginal prisoners from interstate, rural and remote communities were often simply too far away to visit. Even when this was not the case, many prisoners reported that the areas assigned to prison visits were culturally inappropriate, unpleasant, 'family unfriendly' and invasive, and consequently discouraged their families from visiting. In these circumstances, many Aboriginal prisoners in the participant groups commented on the importance of television in allowing them to keep up with current affairs, to retain contact with the outside world and with their own communities, albeit in absentia.

Similarly, many participants did not keep contact with external society by telephone.[6] Out of the group, 23 per cent of participants noted they had telephone contact with family and kin less frequently than once every three months, and 16 per cent of the group did not telephone people outside the prison. Overwhelmingly, financial capacity was the single largest barrier to maintaining contact via telephone with those on the outside, and several participants admitted that they had chosen to spend their limited earnings on a television set rather than saving them to make phone calls. None of the prisons studied permitted internet access or email communication.

Table 1: Frequency of visits by family/friends to the participant group

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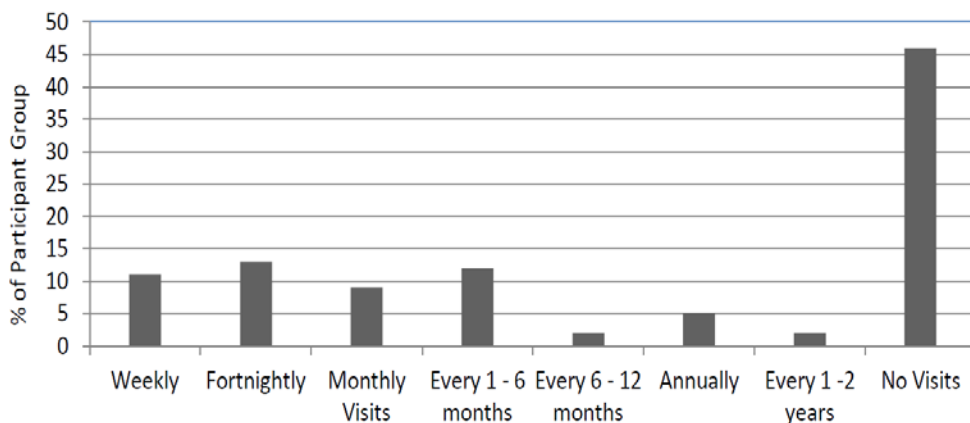
[6]   Prisoners may not receive telephone calls, but may make a limited number of outgoing calls each week. The rules as to the number of calls that may be made vary from prison to prison. Prison officers can also disconnect telephone calls and prisoners are only permitted to telephone a limited number of phone numbers (Legal Services Commission of South Australia 2005).

Table 2: Frequency of contact to family/friends by telephone by the participant group
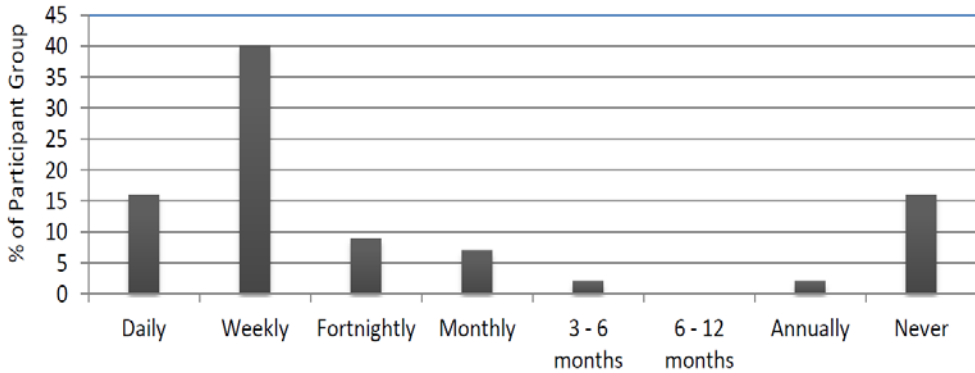
Participants noted that television helped them follow the progress of their own legal case and informed them (especially those going through court or parole processes) of how their crime was perceived by external society. One man discussed the media coverage of his violent crime: 'When it was on the telly it just all hit home. The drawing (court sketch) they did of me, and them talking to the poor bloke [the victim] afterwards. I thought, what have I done?' (Ngarrindjeri Man, Yatala Labour Prison).

Prisoners also receive information about other people being processed through the criminal justice system via television. This may not only alert them to the forthcoming arrival of a particular convicted individual, but also inform them about that person's character and details of his crime. For example, one participant said: 'Generally if it is a big crime you see it on the news. You know what people are up to and who might be coming in here' (Ngarrindjeri Man, Adelaide Remand Centre).

Television news thus pre-warns prisoners about incoming inmates and can be a significant factor in how new arrivals are treated by fellow inmates. It also alerts them to the sensitivities of individuals going through unusually intense experiences, such as a high-profile court case or extended parole proceedings. In some cases, broadcast news forewarned them of family members entering the prison system.

Like previous studies of media in prisons, this study found that dependence on communication is magnified by the experience of incarceration: 'TV is very important — rather have TV than anything else here. It keeps your mind off things. It pretty easy to let your mind go here. You start worrying about your girl, the kids and family, you start doing it tough. TV keeps your mind occupied' (Narungga Man, Cadell Training Centre).

In the most extreme cases of failure to cope with confinement, television might even alleviate feelings of suicide. Many correctional agencies informally understand the importance of television as a tool to divert 'at-risk' prisoners from suicide ideation. During a coronial inquiry into the circumstances prior to the death of a mentally ill Aboriginal man in custody in South Australia, it was noted that a correctional officer had:

> set up a television in the corridor outside of cell 55 on a table, using an upturned metal bin for elevation. This allowed *XXX* to view it through the trap in his cell door if he was standing up. This gesture demonstrated awareness by the correctional service officers of the desirability of providing some stimulation for prisoners who are isolated from the mainstream population (Coroner of South Australia 2006).

However, only one Australian correctional agency has formally recognised the role of television in reducing self-harm and suicide by providing diversion, entertainment and connection to a world outside the prison at a critical time. The Department of Justice (Western Australia) has stated that increases in recreational activities, such as access to radio and television, are an integral part of strategies for a suicide-prevention framework (Jenkins and Booth 1998). Although this jurisdiction has identified the importance of television in reducing suicide ideation, is acutely sensitive to issues surrounding Indigenous deaths in custody and has the second-highest percentage of Aboriginal people in its prison population in Australia, Inspection Standards for Aboriginal Prisoners (2008) devised by the Inspector of Custodial Services of Western Australia make no mention of the need for or importance of access to television for Aboriginal prisoners. Indeed, although they contain a great deal of detail on issues such as communication, recreation and community contact for prisoners, the Standard Guidelines for Corrections in Australia (2012) (which constitute goals to be achieved by correctional services, rather than a set of absolute standards or laws to be enforced, and were drafted to reflect the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners) and similar standards devised by individual Australian jurisdictions (for example, Department of Justice, Victoria (2011) Correctional Management Standards for Men's Prisons in Victoria) contain no mention of prisoner access to television.

That effect that access to broadcast media may provide — to ward off feelings of desperation and hopelessness that precede self-harm and suicide — is due not only to its role as a stimulus; it also has an ontological function, fostering feelings of familiarity (because prisoners can watch content that they viewed before entering prison) and routine (the predictability of television schedules is an important factor in prisoners' ability to 'mark time'). 'Ontological security' refers to a person's elemental sense of safety in the world and originates from the work of Laing (1960), who argued that mental illness derives from the lack of such security. Mental health is achieved through a sense of order, continuity and stability and by avoiding chaos and anxiety. Routines, both spatial and temporal, are vital to the reproduction of social life, and to the deflection of personal anxiety and insecurity (Giddens 1984). Many of the Aboriginal prisoners interviewed said that television was crucially important in marking time and establishing routine when in prison:

> You can tell what day it is from the telly, like its Monday and there is one show I look forward to tonight. TV changes during the year too so if you might forget when it is you can tell. Like Christmas and that. That isn't such a good time — the television shows are terrible (Narungga Man, Cadell Training Centre).

However, routine, familiarity and stability are also born of patterns of interaction. Ontological security requires a basic trust of others as a means of warding off anxiety and maintaining a sense of psychological wellbeing. So, while media in prisons have an ontological impact by providing the substance of everyday life and a familiar temporal rhythm, personal, in-cell media may also undermine ontological security by replacing face-to-face contact. Countless prison studies and prisoner autobiographies appear to support the view that carefully controlled spaces for socialisation are the best means of facilitating a slow and gradual acclimatisation to the prison environment, and the TV 'association room' typically provides a place of connection and camaraderie — as well as one of aggression and violence. Because television rooms were frequently the scenes of 'flashpoints', where weaker or more vulnerable inmates would fall prey to aggressive or more dominant individuals, in-cell viewing was welcomed by some prison staff when it was introduced. Association rooms frequently were not monitored by staff for long periods and they offered no protection from bullying and intimidation. Jewkes (2002) commented that she heard many accounts of how terrified inmates would watch television at the back of the room,

literally with their backs to the wall. However, it also means that one of the primary means of group interaction has now been lost in many establishments. For some prisoners, this loss is a source of regret, particularly when it comes to watching major TV 'events' such as sports fixtures and high-rating entertainment shows, which are most satisfying when viewed as part of a group. Not only does in-cell television enforce atomised, isolated viewing, but it limits opportunities for socialisation, and permits individuals with poor social skills to withdraw almost entirely from interaction with others.

For Aboriginal prisoners who were allowed to gather in groups, communal television viewing provided particularly valuable opportunities for camaraderie, mutual support and the fostering of shared identities. Aboriginal prisoners made concerted efforts to control their social groups and to be imprisoned in the same facilities in order to be close to family and kin. It was observed that a favoured activity was to gather as a group to watch football — Australian Rules football has a special place in the cultures of many Aboriginal communities and, in some instances, it has become as much as 'an obsession' and a tool to keep children in school and promote healthy lifestyle messages. This and other activities centred on television viewing continued social norms practised outside the prison environment, provided opportunities to catch up on news of family and other events and provided respite from the 'pains of imprisonment'.

Conclusion

The importance and role of television for prisoners is seldom discussed. The general paucity of research may be attached to the often diametrically opposed views of correctional agencies and the general public. While prisoner access to televisions is generally accepted by prison administrations as a way to keep prisoners engaged for relatively long periods without complaint, the views of the general public always loom large in discussions about prison media. The popular view of prisons as 'holiday camps' offering an array of 'luxuries' to an undeserving and dangerous underclass continues to circulate (Jewkes 2002). For many politicians, members of the public and, indeed, some prison staff, the provision of amenities in prisons should be 'consistent with purposes of discipline and reformation' (Forsythe 2004:760), and watching television is still widely regarded as a non-purposeful activity. This pervasive view might be termed a 'zero-sum' fallacy; that is, a situation where the issues of criminal justice policy are viewed as a status competition between offenders and victims. Indeed, Zimring and Hawkins go so far as to say that there is a widespread belief that 'everything that can be done to disadvantage offenders in some way helps victims' (2004:164).

The futility of this argument becomes apparent when it is considered that the vast majority of prisoners return to live in society. A contrasting claim holds that it is imperative that prisons do as little damage as possible to the individual and that providing amenity and congruency with the external environment are vital for the mental health, sociability and wellbeing of prisoners — a view supported by our finding that some prisoners choose a physically less 'healthy' custodial environment in order to retain access to a personal television with all the leisure, social and contact benefits that this brings. Moreover, access to television may be an efficient mechanism to divert 'at-risk' prisoners from suicide ideation. At present, many agencies informally recognise this and allow access to TV for 'at-risk' prisoners, but there are few guidelines and procedures that are available to practitioners. Further evidence-based research in this area is likely to yield interesting results and provide keys to handling prisoners in a more humane manner.

History shows that the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners (linked to systemic discrimination and attitudes based on racial or cultural prejudice, as well as economic and social deprivation, substance abuse and cycles of violence across generations) has caused immeasurable damage to these individuals and communities and it is important that the diverse environmental considerations of this group are considered. Our findings underline that the provision of in-cell television is a cost-effective and simple means to increase environmental congruency with multiple benefits to prisoners, including reduced anxiety and the maintenance of psychological wellbeing.

The recent provision of televisions to most cells within the South Australian prison system appears a positive move that has initially reduced the cost burden to inmates' families. The ability of prisoners to afford a television set if a rental system is introduced (as is in place in the UK and other parts of Australia) appears marginal. Prison wages and financial allowances are minimal, and prisoners would have to forgo basic necessities if such a system was introduced. The issue of profiteering from prisoners — as was the case when in-cell TV was introduced in the UK — needs to be avoided at all costs. But, despite an increasing acceptance of the benefits to prison administrations and regimes of in-cell media, the importance of television to prisoners remains much underplayed and misunderstood. This study indicates that the role of television in carceral environments goes far beyond its capacity to keep inmates docile and compliant and takes on an even greater importance in relation to specific groups of prisoners. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners, television nourishes their identity and ontological security by allowing them to stay connected to the outside world, family and country. It contributes significantly to psychological health and wellbeing and can play an important role in staving off feelings of suicide and self-harm. For these reasons, we suggest, in-cell television along with other basic human rights, such as access to telephones, visits and exercise, be subject to legislative standards and more stringent guidelines, so that statutory minimum rights of access, provision and entitlement are stipulated and delivered.

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