

Humans of San Quentin: Humanising the incarcerated through social media advocacy

**Dwayne Antojado,
Marietta Martinovic and
Diane Kahn**

Introduction

Academic literature has long recognised the deleterious effects of media representations of people entangled within the criminal justice system (CJS). Dramatisation, simplification, titillation, conventionalism, and novelty are common themes often cited in research concerning crime reporting. Misrepresentations are often made about the individuals who commit crimes within the news headlines, especially when the media pursues sensationalist narratives which exacerbate personal characteristics to match the undertones and timbre of the news report (Jewkes, 2015).

Several studies highlight how these representations precipitate criminal offending in various ways (e.g., Farrington, 1977; Becker, 2018). For example, the concealment of emotions as is necessitated by mainstream conceptions of “masculinity” hinders the expression of emotion in a safe and prosocial way. Instead of vocalising these emotions through constructive and psychologically productive ways, it may manifest in



antisocial means such as violence and substance abuse. There is a much broader ethical and moral dilemma faced by media outlets, beyond the confines of the criminal justice discourse. Espousing one set of opinions is often proliferated at the loss of the contrary. These conundrums are not specifically only within the portrayal of crime and justice in certain perspectives, but these are also about amplifying a certain fidelity of truths against economic positioning, especially by large media corporations. Within knowledge, there is often a hinterland of truths, dispositions and beliefs. In other words, it is culturally loaded and expressive. No one source of knowledge is right, finding out the truth is a delicate balancing act, requiring a curious mind. Alternative media representations provide these nuances and offer an important counter-current to conventional media.

Humans of San Quentin (HoSQ), a humanitarian

nonprofit, was established in 2018 by Diane Kahn in an effort to create a counter current to media misrepresentations of crime, to appease punitive dialogue, and shift the narrative. Its aim is to give voice to people silenced in our communities by illuminating vulnerable narratives from within prison walls. Through the organisations' social media channels and website, HoSQ shines a light into prison cells around the world. With the use of social and restorative justice reform, they give people the opportunity to improve the lives of the underserved. They strive to provide a collective place to share resources, beliefs and to promote activism regarding social justice. They raise awareness and foster empathy by revealing the humanity that lives inside every one of us, story by story, person by person.

Media's traditional portrayal of crime and criminals

According to the media, in both fictional and factual types of programs and reportage, crime tends to be defined primarily as 'street crime.' Such crime is associated with personal terror and fear, and extreme violence is seen as central. Furthermore, the 'criminal' is distinctive and identifiably different from everyone else in society. Crime is sensationalised, general morality of people is declining, and fear is heightened by the way in which crime is seen to be random in nature, with anyone and everyone a possible target for victimisation (Jewkes, 2015). This narrative

has serious implications for unrealistically increasing the fear of crime particularly among the older sections of the population. Overall, the idea is that there is a continuing 'law-and-order' problem in society (Downes and Morgan, 2007; Mooney and Young, 2006), and that it is constantly getting worse.

Against this tide of disorder and lawlessness, the police and other crime fighters are generally portrayed as 'superheroes,' who are infallible and who use violence legitimately in order to counter the violence of the streets. For example, Reyns and Henson (2010) correlate the portrayal of police with similarities in the way in which comic book and graphic novels represent "heroes," while people involved in crime are depicted as "villains." Further, it has been demonstrated that the interests of the police and the media are entwined; they have a symbiotic relationship, in that the media rely upon the police for much of the information that sells their news product, and the police use the media to represent them in particular ways that reinforce the need for police, and the need for police to do something (Dowler, 2003). The media thus conveys a sensationalised image of crime, and they make unusual events into ordinary events in our lives.

The media are also important not only in shaping society's definitions of crime and crime control, but also in producing legal changes and reinforcing

particular types of policing strategies. 'Moral panics' (see Cohen, 1972) lead to more punitive changes in the law and the adoption of severe police methods. A common example of such policing methods includes increasing use of 'name checks' or 'stop and searches' in particular locales deemed high risk. At times, these policing strategies lead to the introduction of legislative amendments and initiatives; for example, denying sex offenders patronage from certain public areas. These legislative developments have even gone so far as to make people as young as ten years old subjects of criminal law. These reactions 'other' and group offenders into one category, depriving the judiciary the liberty from exercising discretion.

The pluralisation of alternative media

It is important, therefore, to separate the images and realities of crime in society. The media shape our perceptions of crime, and in the process they define crime in particular ways. Importantly, with the pluralisation of media and the growth of citizen-journalists, the conventional media representations of crime and criminal justice actors have come under scrutiny, and in some cases, are being undermined. Widespread access to the internet and mobile phones, along with information sharing platforms (Facebook and Twitter), has transformed the quantity and quality of knowledge production about crime, with alternative

media ranging from sharing research evidence (such as the Critical Criminology Facebook group) to the exchange of 'trauma porn' (Gatwiri and Mapedzahama, 2022).

An example of the proliferation of 'trauma porn' impacting criminal justice outcomes is the conviction recorded against the perpetrators of George Floyd's death in 2020, who happened to be law enforcement officers in the USA. It sparked renewed and more widespread support for the Black Lives Matter movement, representing a sweep of frustrations felt by the over policing of minority communities, especially in the western world. The 'noble cause' corruption so central to traditional media representations in real life shows such as 'COPS,' and dramas such as 'CSI' and 'Law and Order', compete with the memes and videos that depict the police, and the criminal justice system generally, at war against their own people.

The pluralisation of knowledge production (both good and bad) is changing what is known about crime, and what can be known about crime. It is too early in the life of new media technologies to predict how the increase in quantity of knowledge about crime will change the relationships between the state, its authorised criminal justice agents, and the subjects of criminal law. However, already, we are seeing that citizen-journalists, YouTube, and instant information sharing have

changed what we do as subjects of the law, but also that these technologies are forcing criminal justice practitioners and organisations to account for their actions. This increase through unplanned transparency is likely to have significant impacts on the adjudication of individual cases, but also impact on police and other criminal justice practitioners' everyday practices.

HoSQ: Changing the typical narrative

HoSQ, a humanitarian non-profit, was established in 2018. The aim of HoSQ is to give a voice to incarcerated people by illuminating and revealing the humanity of incarcerated people. These narratives appear on the organisation's website (including a blog and a video podcast platform) and social media channels. It provides the community with access to interviews with incarcerated individuals and provides hundreds of written personal stories from people who are incarcerated. Story by story, person by person, the goal is to raise community awareness and foster empathy. The work of HoSQ can be seen as a reflection of the pluralisation of media which impacts upon the way we forge identities of those interacting with the justice system.

HoSQ offers the incarcerated population a unique opportunity to share their narratives in the face of pervasively negative stereotypes typically presented about them. HoSQ staff work

alongside incarcerated people to help them craft their story. The key premise of the HoSQ is "that when we listen to each other's stories we will find that there is more that binds us together than tears us apart." In other words, HoSQ aims to create a tide against the negative current proliferated by the mainstream media.

The process through which incarcerated people articulate their life stories becomes a huge part of their personal journey of discovery - helping them to explain how and why they got to this point in their life. In this way, the reflexive practice induced by participation in HoSQ can also be therapeutic for the individual. In turn, incarcerated people are seen as complex and emotive human beings, directly countering the prevailing epistemologies of what it means to be a "prisoner" in popular consciousness. Overwhelmingly, incarcerated people are not inherently violent, sadistic, or unfeeling, as they are popularly portrayed in media and news coverage, but are instead subject to the same lapses in judgement, unhealthy behavioural patterns, and personal challenges that any of us face as human beings. Thus, when the life stories of incarcerated people are shared with people outside of the walls, these stories shine a light on our shared humanity.

Incarcerated people who share their stories are very complimentary of the process and subsequent impact that this

experience has on them. HoSQ regularly receives letters of gratitude from the people who have featured on their social media platforms, who frequently express that for the first time since their incarceration they felt heard 'in fullness.' They also often reflect about being deprived of the right to self-determination, and instead existing simply in their own complexity and their own narrative. They regard sharing their lives with the outside world as a huge opportunity to dictate who they are in their own words, without the interference from anyone else.

The process of writing and essentially engaging with the community beyond the walls is often described as cathartic by incarcerated people. To that end, we would like to share a letter received from "Freddy" who resided inside San Quentin State Prison:

How the Humans of San Quentin helps me cope

My name is Freddy. I am 33 years old and from Los Angeles. I've been incarcerated since the age of 16. Before coming to prison I was taught 'real men' never show emotion. We keep it bottled up. It is one hundred times harder in prison. Shedding tears when talking about our feelings is labelled as weak. Finding ways for release of stress often resulted in negative ways, such as fighting, drug use, obtaining cell phones, or taking aggression out on my family and friends.

It wasn't until I saw a flyer for the Humans of San Quentin, asking men with face Tattoos to write about our experiences and send it to their office. I had found a new and positive outlet for relieving stress. That night, as I sat down to write, I can vividly remember letting go of my feelings as I wrote, what I had been holding, in my head and heart.

When I was done, I felt like a great weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I felt better, as though I had emptied my bottle in a positive way. Months later I went to my first parole board hearing and included the story I shared with Humans of San Quentin in my packet. When asked why I included my story, I simply stated how much writing to them had helped me manage my stress. Writing in an open and vulnerable way has become a coping skill for me. I just write my emotions on paper without worrying about hurting my image or "looking weak".

The Humans of San Quentin has helped me find a positive tool for managing the stress in my life. Thank you and remember we are humans with human emotions!

*Don't let anything change that.
Sincerely,
"Freddy"*

The impact on those outside the walls who read the stories is similarly profound. Every single story that is shared on the HoSQ platform receives comments from the community; the readers express their

human connections with the incarcerated people. They relate to the human emotions and personal experiences that the incarcerated people share, and they often state that they realise that they have more in common with people on the inside than they could have ever guessed based upon their preconceived notions of what it means to be an incarcerated person. It could be argued that, in real time, human connections are drawn across the prison walls.

It is not just media portrayals of crime and incarcerated people that have a cumulative effect on those entangled in the criminal justice system. It is a much broader and bigger consideration which lies outside criminal justice discourse. The power that the media wields in purveying culture to its billions of subscribers worldwide has palpable implications in the way people behave. “Freddy’s” open letter, shared through HoSQ shows a great example of this, questioning masculine stereotypes about how to compose oneself. Indeed, whilst not explicitly mentioned, the essentialism of masculinity as being “prescribed” - to be tough and not to show emotion (Martino, 1999; Halberstam, 1998) - may have very well been an impetus in this individual’s offending. However, it is certainly having a pervasive and felt effect on the way in which “Freddy” is now coping in prison. The broader conceptual question here is, what are the moral and ethical dilemmas of conveying one set of views at

the cost of another? And are conventional media outlets equipped to grapple with these conundrums? The work of HoSQ goes far beyond repainting incarcerated people’s identities by highlighting the whole gamut of the human faculty, our vulnerabilities, and our challenges as a collective, incarcerated or not.

Conclusion

The pluralisation of media can be a source of relief for many people who are marginalised and historically painted within one set of brushes. Alternative media stations show the grey in what is often conveyed as black and white. It allows for nuances to be illuminated, and people are ubiquitously provided a platform to share their ideas, thoughts and feelings alongside conventional media without commodifying knowledge as needing to “sell,” such as the approach taken by mainstream media outlets, even to this day. Alternative media is not an industry led by an oligarchy of power-hungry individuals. It is simply about sharing knowledge, objective or subjective, irrespective it is knowledge in its rawest form. It is then up to us, consumers, to process this knowledge in whatever way we interpret, but it rebalances the halls of power from one motivated by money to one dominated by passion, truth and in the case of HoSQ, humanity.

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About the authors

Marietta Martinovic, Ph.D.

(Associate Professor of Criminology and Justice, School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, Project Leader, Beyond the Stone Walls Advisory Collective, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia).

Marietta is an Associate Professor in Criminology and Justice Studies in the School of Global, Urban, and Social Studies, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. Before becoming an academic Marietta has worked as a Community Corrections Officer for Corrections Victoria. There she developed a passion for studying community-based corrections, particularly the area of electronic monitoring, which she researched extensively through her Masters and PhD. She has also consulted governments, nationally and internationally, about developing relevant electronic monitoring legislation, enhancing the operational aspects of electronic monitoring application, and setting up an ongoing evaluation framework and improvement processes. She started the first and only Australian Inside-Out

Prison Exchange Program in Australia and has established and is leading four prison-based and Beyond the Stone Walls Advisory Collective.

Dwayne Antojado

(Project Leader, Beyond the Stone Walls Advisory Collective, School of Global, Urban and Social Studies RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia; Lived Experience Coordinator, Centre for Just Places; Jesuit Social Services).

Dwayne Antojado is a researcher and the Project Leader of 'Beyond the Stone Walls Advisory Collective,' a research and advocacy initiative established through the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University in Melbourne, Australia. He is currently the Lived Experience Coordinator at the Centre for Just Places, Jesuit Social Services, and is a member of the Lived Experience Advisory Panel of the Australian Community Support Organisation (ACSO). He has previously held positions with other not-for profit organisations, including the Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO). He attended the first and only international prison radio conference in Oslo, Norway in June 2022. His research interests include LGBTQI+ experiences in the CJS, lived experience criminology, and prison radio.

Diane Kahn, M.Ed.

(Executive Director, Humans of San Quentin; Board Member, School of Education, University of San Francisco, San Francisco, USA).

Diane Kahn is a teacher and a social justice advocate. She teaches men inside San Quentin to attain their high school diploma

in the Academic Peer Education Project for currently incarcerated men to mentor their peers. She founded Humans of San Quentin to share the voices of people incarcerated around the world through the individual stories of daily life behind bars. Together the organisation aspires to shine a light in every cell around the globe, story by story, person by person. Diane holds a Master of Education and is a board member of the School of Education at the University of San Francisco.