

# Doing time in “Camp Cupcake”: Lessons learned from newspaper accounts of Martha Stewart’s incarceration

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Popular media images of women in prison are rare and often distorted. Newspaper articles on women in prison are also rare yet potentially offer an alternative view of these women. To understand how female prisoners are depicted by the news media, this research examines newspaper articles written about Martha Stewart’s incarceration. While several themes were identified, this article examines messages related to the correctional system and the effects of incarceration. These articles project distorted and damaging images of female prisoners. By failing to acknowledge how Stewart is different from the typical female inmate these articles normalize her experiences. Overall, these articles send messages that female offenders are not being punished and that they easily transition back into the community after incarceration.

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*Keywords: media, female prisoners, women and media, women and prison*

## INTRODUCTION

Currently there are more than 104,848 women incarcerated in our nation’s prisons (Harrison & Beck, 2005). The population of incarcerated females has increased dramatically since the 1980s, yet these women remain an invisible correctional population, especially to the general public. Since most people do not come into direct contact with the criminal justice system, their knowledge of and opinions about the correctional system are based on the images they receive from the media. However, the correctional system is the component of the criminal justice system that is the least likely to be depicted by the media (Surette, 1998). Given an ever-growing institutional population one might think that prisons and inmates would be an important news item, nevertheless, news stories rarely focus on these topics. The scarcity with which these stories appear is likely due in part to the restrictions placed on media access to prisons and prisoners by administrators and/or state legislation (Lipschultz & Hilt, 2002; Sussman, 2002). When prisons are in the news it is due to rare events such as riots or escapes (Chermak, 1998; Lipschultz & Hilt, 2002). Even less common than general stories concerning the correctional system are those featuring women in prison. Female prisoners rarely riot or escape. Since women also make up a small percentage of the correctional population, female prisoners are rarely considered newsworthy. According to Clark (2005), “news organizations are much more likely to sensationalize individual crimes than to examine the truth behind the 182,000 women incarcerated in the U.S. So stereotypes go unchallenged by serious news analysis, and the public image of women in prison is at the mercy of pop culture dreck...” (p. 37). The image of female prisoners most readily available is contained in Hollywood films. Since the 1950s films about women in prison have focused on girls-gone-bad plots using exploitation-style filmmaking.

These babes-behind-bars films “reinforce society’s stereotypes about female prisoners: that they are violent, worthless, sex-crazed monsters totally unworthy of humane treatment, much less educational programs” (Clowers, 2001, p. 28). While it is true that the audience may question these images, the problem is that there are very few alternative media images available. Some documentaries on women in prison exist, but tend to focus exclusively on violent female offenders (Clark, 2005). Since most women are not incarcerated for violent offenses, even these more realistic portrayals of female inmates are unrepresentative.

In an interview, Beth Richie, a feminist criminologist and activist, discusses the negative impact of these images on female offenders (Lydersen, 2005). She states that the public is for the most part unaware of the real challenges faced by female offenders, such as poverty, joblessness, and substance abuse. Instead the public views highly sexualized images of these women. Richie believes that these images have a very real impact on social policies. When people embrace these false images of incarcerated women, they do not challenge ineffective and harsh policies, such as the current use of imprisonment (Lydersen, 2005). Thus, it is critical that accurate depictions of women in prison are made available.

The most readily available and far-reaching avenue for a more realistic portrayal of female prisoners may be the news media. Yet research on how the news media portrays women in prison does not exist. Newspaper articles on this topic may be less common than other crime-related news stories, but the importance of understanding the messages inherent in these articles should not be negated. Any image of a fairly unknown phenomenon has the potential to affect people, and therefore, is an issue worth exploring. The opportunity to do just that presented itself when an abundance of stories were printed about one female prisoner in particular—Martha Stewart.

In 2004 Martha Stewart was sentenced to serve five months in prison for lying to investigators. America’s domestic diva serving time in a federal prison was considered newsworthy. Journalists speculated about her impending prison sentence and provided details on the institution in which she would be incarcerated. Readers learned about the cells, the food (including holiday menus), and the activities of the prison camp in Alderson, West Virginia, which was referred to as “Camp Cupcake.” Martha Stewart’s release from prison received just as much fanfare from the media. What did she look like? What was she wearing? What was she looking forward to doing upon release? Had she changed for the better? And, what were the details of her impending house arrest on her 153-acre estate? The news media seemed fascinated by her incarceration, which is largely attributed to the fact that Martha Stewart is famous. It is also likely related to who she is beyond her fame. Martha Stewart sells an image of perfection and is also known as being a fairly aggressive female, thus the news media was able to tell a story of a woman whose downfall was drastic and in many people’s minds may have gotten what she deserved. Each story became a lesson about the correctional system and more specifically about women in prison. With each story a very particular image of incarcerated women was being imprinted in the minds of the public. However, the question is, how accurate is that image?

In an effort to understand the images of incarcerated women perpetuated by the news media’s attention to Martha Stewart’s incarceration, the current study examines articles written

about Martha Stewart before, during, and following her incarceration. Examining the themes presented in these articles gives insight into how female offenders are depicted by the news media and more specifically enables us to see how the images used in the articles about Martha Stewart's incarceration present a distorted view of this correctional population, while normalizing her experiences.

## METHODS

This study examines newspaper articles about Martha Stewart published in the top five newspapers in the U.S. between September 1, 2004 and March 31, 2005, which covers approximately one month before Martha Stewart's incarceration until approximately one month following her release. According to the Media Info Center (2004), based on circulation, the top newspapers at the time were: *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Daily News* (New York). LexisNexis and newspaper databases were used to identify articles about Martha Stewart. Each article was examined to determine whether the story was about Martha Stewart or if she was a major component in the story. In all, 195 articles are included in this study (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Frequency of Martha Stewart Articles by Newspaper*

Newspaper	Number of Articles	Percentage
USA Today	17	8.7%
Wall Street Journal	31	15.9%
The New York Times	46	23.6%
Los Angeles Times	36	18.5%
Daily News, New York	65	33.3%
	195	100%

Content analysis was used to examine the themes appearing in these articles, and most importantly, the messages these articles send regarding women's prisons and the women incarcerated in these institutions. In order to identify the main themes contained in these articles, a subset of articles (n=46) was analyzed. Once the themes were identified, the remaining articles were examined to determine which of the themes were contained in each story. Table 2 lists each of the themes and the number of articles in which each is contained.

**Table 2***Frequency of Article Themes*

Theme	Articles
Lessons about the correctional system	74.4% (n=145)
Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, Inc.	38.5% (n=75)
Martha's views about Incarceration	34.4% (n=67)
The Effects of incarceration on Martha	31.8% (n=62)
Public's Opinions of Martha	18.5% (n=36)
Martha's appearance	16.9% (n=33)
Other	23.1% (n=45)

Most often articles offered straight facts about the case and in many instances attempted to provide lessons about the system. For example, some articles contain information on the Federal Bureau of Prisons, as well as the institution that Martha was incarcerated in. Nearly three-fourths of the articles analyzed contain information on the case and/or the system. Since this particular case involves the head of a corporation it is not surprising that a significant proportion of the articles (38.5%) include information on Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, Inc., including the current state of the company. Another common theme is Martha Stewart's views of her experiences and on incarceration in general (34.4%). The effects of incarceration are also incorporated into these articles. Nearly 32 percent of the articles discuss negative and/or positive effects of incarceration on Martha Stewart. The less common themes include public opinion about Martha Stewart and her case, Martha Stewart's appearance, and other topics, such as her arrival to and departure from the institution, the infamous poncho that another inmate made for her, and other information about her life that is not related to her incarceration or the case. Since the main goal of this study is to focus on media messages about women in prison, the subsequent section offers a detailed analysis of articles that contain two themes: facts and lessons about the correctional system and the effects of incarceration. An analysis of these two themes presents an interesting look into the depiction of female prisoners by the news media. In general the messages show us that by highlighting these elements and failing to offer comparisons, the press actually normalizes the unique experience of Martha Stewart as an inmate.

## ANALYSIS

The main purpose of the news is to inform; thus it is not surprising that most articles offer basic facts about Stewart's case. While reporters only provide general information, the way in which the facts are presented create specific images of women in prison. Many articles delve further into the topic by offering specific information about the correctional system as it relates to Martha Stewart. In addition, some articles use her case as a springboard to offer a more general lesson about the true nature of the correctional system. Overall, the articles present information on both women's prisons and institutional life. The articles inform readers about the federal correctional system and the prison routine, as well as the post-incarceration effects of imprisonment. Some of the information is informative and useful; however, in many articles the information presented is unique to Martha Stewart's experiences in prison. Surprisingly few articles rely on data about women's prisons and females incarcerated within these institutions to alert readers to the distinctiveness of Martha Stewart as a prison inmate.

### *The Federal Bureau of Prisons*

For several months Martha Stewart was the focus of many newspaper articles, but it was not until after her sentencing that articles contained specific information about the correctional system. Once Martha Stewart was sentenced to five months of imprisonment, and she petitioned to begin serving her sentence before appeal, the Federal Bureau of Prisons became a common topic in the newspaper articles pertaining to her case. More specifically, journalists described the institutions in Danbury, Connecticut, and Coleman, Florida, both of which were being considered for her incarceration. Reporters most often provided the following facts about the two prisons: location, security-level, and capacity. The information about these institutions presented in these early articles does not do much more than inform readers about these specific institutions. They present these institutions as minimum security and running above capacity. It is not until Martha Stewart is assigned to an institution that more detailed information is provided.

Ultimately Martha Stewart was not placed in either of the above institutions. Instead she was assigned to serve time in a prison camp located in Alderson, West Virginia. Articles containing information about this prison camp presented basic facts about the history and structure of the institution. Alderson is the oldest women's prison in the federal system. As an article printed in *USA Today* published on October 6, 2004, points out, it is the "former home to some infamous inmates: Kathryn Kelly (wife of 'Machine Gun' Kelly), Billie Holiday, Tokyo Rose, Axis Sally and would-be presidential assassins 'Squeaky' Fromme and Sara Jane Moore" (Stein, 2004, para. 2). Articles paint a pretty picture of the prison camp at Alderson. An article in the *New York Times* contains the following quote describing the institution: "The prison is built like a college campus... There is a lot of greenery and there is no barbed wire around" (Meier, 2004, para. 11). The inmates live in dormitories or cottages that contain cubicles, not barred cells (Meier, 2004). Articles inform readers that most prisoners are assigned to a large dormitory before being allowed to live in one of the cottages, although Martha Stewart was immediately placed in a cottage. One article cites this as a show of favoritism (Cohen, 2005), rather than acknowledging that it may be a way to protect a famous inmate such as Stewart.

The newspaper articles containing descriptions of the prison camp at Alderson create a pleasant image of the institution. Depicted as “the 105-acre bucolic campus on the Greenbriar River” (Stein, 2004, para. 3) the institution is presented as more of a peaceful “getaway” nestled in the mountains than a prison. The articles do not contain any information on the history of women’s prisons that would explain why these institutions are structured in such a way, thereby failing to provide a true understanding of the institution. In addition, these articles fail to acknowledge that this is one type of women’s prison in the system. Nationwide there are eleven (excluding transfer centers and correctional centers) federal institutions that house female prisoners (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2006). Most of these institutions are connected to larger facilities containing male inmates. Alderson is one of only three separate institutions for female inmates in the federal system, and it is the only one of these institutions that is a prison camp. According to the Federal Bureau of Prisons, Federal Prison Camps are minimum security institutions that:

[H]ave dormitory housing, a relatively low staff-to-inmate ratio, and limited or no perimeter fencing. These institutions are work- and program-oriented; and many are located adjacent to larger institutions or on military bases, where inmates help serve the labor needs of the larger institution or base.

<http://www.bop.gov/locations/institutions/index.jsp>

Thus, the environment and the experiences presented in these newspaper articles are contextually different from that of most institutions. Yet, the press does not present this type of institutional information. By failing to acknowledge the uniqueness of the prison camp at Alderson, these articles normalize this type of institution. The newspaper articles continue with these failures when they broach the topic of the daily prison routine.

### *The Prison Routine*

On October 8, 2004, Martha Stewart reported to the prison camp at Alderson to begin her five-month sentence. The articles that were written following the start of her sentenced shifted focus and began to report on various aspects of institutional life and the prison routine. In their reports newspapers painted a picture of a fairly harmless, mundane, even relaxing prison atmosphere.

The prison environment is extremely different from that of the free world, and much has been written about the adjustment process for prisoners. According to Pollock (2002),

Entering prison is a frightening experience. Even women who have long criminal histories...report that their first trip to prison gave rise to fears of homosexual rape, guard brutality, and loss of friends or family. Upon entry, a woman is fingerprinted and photographed, stripped, searched, and given prison clothing...Often this is done in groups so women may be forced to stand naked in lines waiting for prison issue clothing (p. 69).

Newspaper articles containing information about Martha Stewart’s time in prison do not highlight such a process. The articles are more apt to mention the khaki prison uniform than to provide details on the process inmates go through when first incarcerated. An exception appeared in the *Daily News, New York* on October 6, 2004: “like all new inmates at the Federal

Prison Camp in Alderson, W. Va., Martha Stewart will be subjected to a strip search, complete with squat and cough” (Daly, 2004, para. 1). Several days later another article in the same newspaper reports:

inside the prison at 6:15 a.m., she was fingerprinted and forced to disrobe for a visual inspection for contraband. She then was assigned a cell unit and began a two-week orientation process that will include a work assignment and physical and psychological testing (Bode & Smith, 2004, para. 15).

These two statements are the closest any of the articles come to describing the intake and adjustment processes. It appears that rather than focusing on the adjustments that a new prisoner must go through, reporters are more concerned with describing some of Martha Stewart’s daily activities within the prison.

One of the prison-based activities considered newsworthy is work. Even before Martha Stewart entered prison many of the articles indicated that she would be required to work while serving her sentence. For example, one article states:

Ms. Stewart would be expected to work while in prison as do the other inmates, in jobs that range from groundskeeper to food service worker to plumber or warehouse worker. The job pays 12 cents to 40 cents an hour... (Newman, 2004, para. 5).

Articles focusing on prison-based work highlight the fact that the labor is menial and that in comparison to Martha Stewart’s \$900,000 annual salary, she will be making almost nothing. For example, Farrell (2004) writes:

Stewart, who was worth close to \$1 billion before her legal troubles began two years ago, will start her job in food service, landscaping or sanitation services at about 12 cents an hour. Inmates with more seniority can earn up to 40 cents an hour (para. 9).

While highlighting an integral part of the prison system, these articles fail to offer insight into the purpose of this work and the employment-related problems faced by female prisoners. In women’s prisons “work assignments are typically menial and often are performed over and over again for the mere purpose of keeping the women busy” (Pollock, 2002, p. 92). Yet, most women in prison require more extensive work experience than offered through this type of labor. Incarcerated females are in dire need of vocational skills and work experience, without which they will have difficulty transitioning back into society. The type of work detailed in these articles is that which is used to sustain the institution, not the type of work that would prepare these inmates for release into the community. Since Martha Stewart owns a company, employment issues are not a concern for her, thus it appears as if the newspaper articles are highlighting this aspect of prison life merely to show how far she has fallen. It could also be a way to show that in prison she is the same as the rest of the inmates, thereby normalizing her experience. In this instance, it is one of the ways that Martha Stewart’s prison experiences actually coincide with those of her fellow inmates.

Newspaper accounts also recount the other activities that filled Martha Stewart's days in prison. The activities described appear to be fairly normal, and definitely not unique to the prison environment. According to an article in the *Daily News*, "The lifestyle guru spent her third day in prison playing Scrabble, taking a whirl on a garden swing-and charming her fellow inmates" (Bode & Connor, 2004, para. 2). Readers learn that while in prison Martha "foraged for dandelion greens to improve the prison fare, whipped up impromptu microwave recipes, taught yoga, read Bob Dylan's autobiography, made a ceramic Nativity scene for her mother and crocheted toy opossums for her dogs" (Reuters, 2005, para. 14). A *New York Times* article reports:

Ms. Stewart's day begins with an hourlong workout. Friends report that she has trimmed down or at least toned up, thanks to the prison gym. She spends eight hours a day on a cleaning crew assigned to buildings and grounds. At night, she is free "to read or write or think or do projects" (Hays, 2005, para. 27).

Overall, these articles depict a prison routine that is easy and in some ways relaxing. Most importantly the newspapers create an image of prison life that is not punitive. In doing so, reporters fail to project the realities of the prison routine, including programming and idleness. Their days are not only filled with work. Prisons are known for forcing inmates to endure long periods of idle time. Inmates also participate in programs, such as educational and vocational training, as well as various treatment programs. While there is a shortage of space in some programs and a lack of program availability itself in some institutions, these programs are an integral part of the prison experience. The articles written about Martha Stewart's experience in prison do not highlight such programming. The one exception is an article published in *The Wall Street Journal*, which includes the following statement:

Ms. Stewart... has given inmates guidance on sentencing, led yoga sessions and offered pointers to a prison weaving class. Last month, Ms. Stewart kicked off an eight-week seminar, organized by inmates, entitled "Empowerment for Women." Her lecture topic for the overflow crowd: "What's Hot and What's Not" in starting a business. (Cohen, 2005, para. 4)

The important difference is that Martha Stewart is not actually participating in the programs but leading them. Most female inmates are not in the same position as Martha Stewart is to teach.

Visitation is also a part of the prison routine that was considered newsworthy. Early on the articles indicate that one reason Martha Stewart did not want to be incarcerated in Alderson was because it is not as easily accessible as the other institutions considered by the Federal Bureau of Prisons, thereby making visitation more difficult. Most women's prisons are located in rural areas far away from where most of the women live. The distance between prisoners' hometowns and the institution is even more dramatic in the federal system since there are only a few institutions across the United States (Pollock, 2002). This geographic isolation has been cited as a major issue in the psychological adjustment of female prisoners. Separation from their families, especially their children, and the distance makes it less likely that they will be able to

maintain contact (Belknap, 2001). Only one newspaper report about Martha Stewart actually addresses the reality of visitation at a women's prison. Cohen (2005, para. 21) explains: "The facility is difficult to reach for the families of inmates, many of whom are indigent. The nearest train line is 22 miles; the nearest bus depot, 17 miles. A taxi ride from either place costs more than \$20." Other articles focus more specifically on Martha Stewart's visitors and visiting practices.

Soon after starting her sentence an announcement was made that Martha would be starring in two new television programs after her release. Subsequently many of the newspaper articles contained information on her visitation practices, especially as they pertain to who was visiting her and speculations about the topics of discussion between her and her visitors. Since money and transportation are not problems for most people connected to Martha Stewart, she received many visitors. Articles inform readers that visitors must be approved (e.g., Grove & Morgan, 2004b). According to an article printed in the *New York Times*, she received visits from the editor in chief of her magazine, the producer of her television programs, and the chief executive of her company, as well as other employees (Hays, 2005). Even though some of her business associates may have been allowed to visit her, restrictions were placed on the topics of conversation. Some of the newspaper articles indicate prisoners cannot talk about business while in prison and that a prisoner caught violating this rule can be transferred to another institution or can have time added on to her sentence (e.g., Grove & Morgan, 2004). According to a *New York Times*' article, the visitors reported that they discussed prison life and life outside of the prison, but never broached any business-related topics (Hays, 2005). So, even though announcements about changes in her business were made after she reported to the prison, information given to the press attempts to show that these transactions were not made during her incarceration. The articles containing information about Martha Stewart's visitation practices rarely discuss other visitors, such as family members, even though they were known to visit her. When possible most prisoners receive visits from family members and friends, yet in the Martha Stewart case these types of visitors were not considered newsworthy. By not highlighting how Martha Stewart's visitation practices and rules may have been unique from that of other inmates, the press continues to normalize her prison experience.

### *Leaving Prison and the Effects of Incarceration*

On March 6, 2005, Martha Stewart was released from prison. Journalists reported on her unique departure from the institution. Wearing a poncho made by a fellow inmate, she was accompanied by her daughter to a private jet, which took her home where she would begin serving five months of house arrest. It is glaringly obvious that this type of exit from the prison system is not typical. What the articles fail to acknowledge, however, is exactly how her other post-prison experiences are unique.

Society is fraught with barriers to successful reintegration, so when prisoners reenter society after a period of incarceration they face many challenges. Typical prisoners are negatively affected by the stigma of a prison term for years to come. Housing difficulties and unemployment are two of the biggest obstacles offenders face during this transition. These are obviously not issues for Martha Stewart, who returned to her several hundred-acre-estate, and immediately resumed her business ventures while under house arrest. The articles written about

Martha Stewart's incarceration could serve as a forum to inform the public of the challenges faced by prisoners exiting our prison system; however, rather than highlighting the difficulties of transitioning from prison back into the free world, the newspaper articles tend to emphasize the ease with which Martha Stewart resumed her role in society. The articles suggest that not only did she adjust with relative ease, but also that her time in prison was extremely beneficial. For example, Glater (2005) quotes a defense attorney: "From the government's perspective, the objective of incarceration is to punish someone, and I think that Martha Stewart has, ingeniously, instead of being punished, turned it to her advantage" (para. 6).

The newspaper articles suggest that Martha Stewart benefited from the prison experience in several ways. First, many articles indicate that she benefited financially from her decision to begin serving her sentence before appeal. Shortly after she made this announcement, stock prices for her company increased and this upward swing continued throughout most of her time in prison. One article reports that Martha "has managed to turn life in federal prison into a nifty career move. Her company's stock is soaring, and she plans for not one but two television shows. It almost makes you wonder why the Enron types are fighting so hard to stay out of jail" (Haberman, 2005, para. 2). These new television projects and the return of advertising revenue to her magazine can both be seen as positive outcomes associated with her prison term. On a more personal level, several articles highlight the fact that Martha Stewart lost weight and looked healthier when she was released. Finally, Martha Stewart was able to use her prison experience to create a new image, which was profitable for her. While most offenders are negatively labeled by the prison experience, Martha's image actually softened and became more positive following incarceration. In a *New York Times*' article Glater (2005) writes: "Ms. Stewart has used prison to soften her image-to make her, in the public eye, a more sympathetic person than the perfectionist entertainer and executive she was seen to be before her sentence"(para. 12). The Associated Press (2005) states that she has a new down-to-earth image. Quoting John Barker, president of a marketing firm: "What prison has done is to make her more fallible. There is this opportunity to make Martha more approachable, more empathetic" (AP, 2005, para. 7). Soriano (2005) writes that she "emerged from prison a bona fide celebrity" (para. 1). While discussing this topic, some of the articles do note that Martha is not the usual inmate in this respect. For example, a *New York Times*' article states:

Of course, Ms. Stewart is a most unusual ex-con; few have her public relations savvy and resources. "Stewart is very successful at spin," said Austin Sarat, a professor of jurisprudence and political science at Amherst College. "The prison episode right from the beginning has been successfully spun" (Glater, 2005, para. 7).

While some reporters recognize that Martha Stewart is unique in her ability use her prison experience for such positive personal gain, most fail to indicate how most prisoners' lives are severely damaged by incarceration.

Was Martha Stewart negatively affected by her time in prison? Based on the information contained in these newspaper articles, she really did not suffer from any lasting negative effects related to her incarceration. Some negative effects are cited, but in the end these are cancelled out by the benefits. For example, many of the articles report that Martha Stewart's company posted losses despite the increases in stock. However, they also pointed out that many of these

losses were tied to her legal uncertainties. These articles report that her syndicated program was cancelled and that advertisers withdrew from the magazine and readership decreased. A few articles suggest that her image would remain tainted because of her stint in federal prison, but the majority highlights the positive changes in her career and life. Similar to the negligence seen in relation to the uniqueness of Stewart's prison experiences, the press fails to contrast her post-prison experiences to those of a typical inmate, thereby continuing to depict a normal prison experience despite the fact that Martha Stewart's experience following prison are anything but normal.

### *Other Lessons about the Correctional System*

Martha Stewart's prison experiences are not the only ones contained in the articles examined. Some of the newspaper articles written about or related to her incarceration offer other lessons about the correctional system by using statistics or stories about other prisoners. Others take a lighthearted approach to prison life by informing readers about some of the institutional activities, particularly those activities that are quintessentially Martha Stewart, such as crafts and cooking. Some of these themes actually help highlight the fact that she is not a typical inmate; however, their scarcity negates their potential influence.

Even when focusing on a specific case, journalists can better inform readers by providing additional information, particularly statistics, which would also serve as a way to highlight the uniqueness of a particular case. In the Martha Stewart case only a few articles contain supplemental information on women in prison. Statistics on women in prison are readily available and informative, so it is disappointing that only three (1.5%) of the 195 articles examined refer to actual statistics about women in prison. A March 3, 2005 article from *The Wall Street Journal* provides the most detail about women in prison. Using official statistics, Cohen (2005) informs readers about recent trends in women's incarceration, the characteristics of women in prison, including those in Alderson, and the effect of drug laws on females. Two other articles providing data about women in prison were both printed in *USA Today* (Farrell, 2004; Stein, 2004). Greg Farrell's article focuses specifically on the women in Alderson and notes that most are African American and are incarcerated for drug offenses. Cheryl Stein's article provides some vital information on the female prison population, highlighting race issues, abuse and addiction histories, motherhood, and mental health issues. Overall, these articles provide some important information about women in prison. Unfortunately, this type of article is an exception. Most articles lacked the context necessary to adequately describe the prison population into which Martha Stewart merged.

While other articles did not focus specifically on female prisoners, they attempt to use the Martha Stewart case to describe the prison system and its effects. One article published in the *New York Times* (Haberman, 2005) discusses a very real barrier to reintegration by telling the story of a man who served eleven years for armed-robbery. He was unable to get a job as a barber because his felony conviction barred him from being able to obtain a license. This article is one of the only articles related to the Martha Stewart case to highlight the realities faced by both male and female offenders as they reenter society. Another piece in the *New York Times* written by Chuck Colson, who spent time in federal prison for obstruction of justice in conjunction with Watergate, raises the question "What, precisely, are prisons for" (Colson, 2005,

para. 1). He believes that Martha Stewart's release has people asking this question. Since most of the articles published during her incarceration failed to ask such questions, it is a pertinent issue. The writer addresses it by outlining the lessons he learned in prison. While both of these articles use the Martha Stewart case as a starting point, both are written from the perspective of a male inmate. Male and female inmates have different prison and reentry experiences, thus these articles fail to inform readers about the perils of the women's prison system.

A few articles take a more lighthearted approach to the Martha Stewart case. For example, an article published in the *New York Times* (Trebay, 2004) focuses on the history of crafts in the prison system. Another article published in the *L.A. Times* (Maldonado, 2004), written by a former inmate, discusses cooking in prison. Both of these articles highlight the creativity of inmates, who use what is available to them to express themselves artistically and to normalize their prison time through activities like cooking. These articles are informative and interesting; however, they articles also fail to tackle issues that are critical to the women who are incarcerated in our nation's prisons.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Despite an ever-increasing number of women incarcerated in our country, the public does not know very much about this correctional population. Unfortunately, the images and information they receive regarding the women incarcerated in our nation's prison system are both limited and distorted. Beth Richie believes that the issues surrounding women's imprisonment are difficult to deal with, so rather than look at things such as our responses to substance abuse, poverty, and unemployment, we create images that are inaccurate and destructive (Lydersen, 2005). This statement appears to be reinforced when one examines the newspaper articles associated with Martha Stewart's incarceration. While offering substantially more information about women in prison than typically available in the press, the images of women in prison presented in these articles are also distorted. Thus, it can be argued that while presenting the public with more information on women in prison, stories related to Martha Stewart's incarceration are equally as damaging as women in prison films.

Hollywood films offer a highly sexualized prison fantasy. This image is excluded from newspaper articles examined in this study. Hollywood also portrays a more brutal image of women's prisons than the articles examined. Degradation, fighting, and barren conditions are commonly portrayed in these films. Overall, however, the newspaper articles depict a highly feminized and soft version of imprisonment with their focus on leisurely activities such as yoga, knitting, and crafts, and a softer image of the institution itself—cottages without bars. In their own ways the images presented both in film and in the newspaper are damaging to female offenders.

The main way the articles pertaining to the Martha Stewart case are damaging is in the normalization of her prison experiences. The way most of the newspaper articles are written, and the images associated with them, make her experiences appear routine, even though she is a famous person with privileges that most female offenders do not have. One can see just how distorted these images are when Martha Stewart is compared to other women in prison.

To start, Martha Stewart is a unique inmate simply because of where she was incarcerated, the length of her sentence and even the specific crime for which she was imprisoned. When compared to state prisons, the federal system holds a small percentage of the women incarcerated in this country, with most recent statistics indicating that they hold less than 12 percent (Harrison & Beck, 2005). Within the federal system Martha Stewart was incarcerated in a minimum-security facility. In 2004 only 20.5 percent of incarcerated females in the federal system were imprisoned at this level (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2005). Her term of imprisonment is another factor making her a unique prisoner, yet it is a topic that the newspaper articles fail to acknowledge. Martha Stewart's sentence length was considerably less than that of the average woman incarcerated in the federal system. Overall, women in the federal prison system serve an average of nearly 21 months (Sourcebook, 2003). More specifically the average time served for property offenses ranges from 10.6 to 11.4 months (Sourcebook, 2003). Martha Stewart, on the other hand, was sentenced to five months in prison. Lastly, like many female inmates, Martha Stewart is incarcerated for a property offense, not a violent crime. Yet, she is somewhat different from most of the women incarcerated in these minimum-security facilities. Only 12 percent were incarcerated for offenses similar to Martha Stewart, including extortion, bribery and fraud. Most inmates, 72 percent, were incarcerated for drug offenses (Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2005). Most of these differences are not addressed in the newspaper articles examined. Only the articles including statistics on women in prison come close to offering this type of information, and only three articles include this type of information.

The differences between Martha Stewart and other female inmates extend beyond legal factors. The greatest differences are found when one compares background and personal characteristics. Martha Stewart is white, educated, employed, wealthy and famous. Contrast this to most female prisoners and one sees that she is atypical. The women incarcerated in our nation's prisons are disproportionately minority, of lower socio-economic status, are undereducated and underemployed or unemployed (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004; Pollock, 2002). Two-thirds of the women incarcerated in our country are minority (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999). The women incarcerated in the federal system do not have extensive educational backgrounds. According to Greenfeld and Snell (1999), 27 percent have some high school or less, and only 44 percent have graduated from high school or obtained a GED. Furthermore, most women imprisoned in our country do not have extensive or stable work histories. Only 40 percent of female inmates in state facilities were employed full time prior to their arrest (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999). When they are employed, their income-level is low. Greenfeld and Snell (1999) report that 37 percent of female inmates earned less than \$600 in the month prior to arrest and 30 percent of female inmates were on welfare. On the other hand, Martha Stewart is educated, owns a company, and earns hundreds of thousands of dollars a year.

Martha Stewart is like many women incarcerated in that she is a mother; however, her daughter is an adult. Women in prison are likely to be the mothers of minor children and serve as the primary caregiver for these children (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004; Pollock, 2002). Fifty-nine percent of the women in federal prison have minor children (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999). Due to visitation complications, many of these women do not see their children during incarceration. Over 60 percent of the mothers in one visitation study did not receive any visits from their children (Casey-Acevedo & Bakken, 2002). When these women are released, reunification with

their children can be a major challenge, especially when they leave prison ill equipped to financially take care of themselves.

While readers do not know everything about Martha Stewart's background, it is presumed that she has not endured some of the same challenges as many of the other female inmates. Women incarcerated in our country are very likely to have histories of sexual and physical abuse and have substance abuse problems. It has been estimated that nearly 60 percent of the women incarcerated in state prisons have been physically or sexually abused (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999). Over 50 percent used drugs and/or alcohol during the commission of the offense for which they are incarcerated (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999). As one can easily see, the background characteristics of the women in prison are considerably different from those of Martha Stewart. Compared to Martha Stewart these women are at a distinct disadvantage that is only compounded further by their time spent behind bars.

The normalization of Martha Stewart's continues with the coverage of her post-release experiences. While Martha Stewart made a relatively smooth transition back into the community after incarceration, this is not typical of most inmates. Women transitioning back into the community after incarceration face a plethora of challenges. According to Richie (2001), women, particularly lower-class minority women, face many barriers to successful reentry. These women are in need of treatment for substance abuse problems. They require adequate health care and help in dealing with mental health issues. Due to their histories of abuse, women reentering the community after incarceration are in need of violence prevention programs and help with post-traumatic stress disorder. Furthermore, they are in need of education and employment services, safe and affordable housing, and help with family reunification. Many of these problems are not dealt with sufficiently within the prison, causing problems during reentry, which is compounded further by the fact that the communities where most of these women return offer few services and have very limited resources (Richie, 2001). Even if Martha Stewart faced any of these challenges upon release, she has resources at her disposal to create a relatively smooth transition back into the free world.

It is apparent that the problems faced by most female prisoners during incarceration and while transitioning back into the community are extremely different from the images presented in the articles about Martha Stewart's incarceration. The articles do not completely ignore these realities; however, only an extremely small number actually offer a glimpse into the realities these women face by offering data on the female prison population and their problems. It is through this lack of contrast that the press normalized Martha Stewart's prison experiences. While it is apparent that she is different from most people due to her fame and status, the dearth of information on other inmates sends the message that as an inmate she is not unique. Had this type of comparison been contained in more of the newspaper coverage of Martha Stewart's incarceration, it would have served to highlight not only the newsworthiness of her incarceration but also to bring to the readers' attention the more critical issues facing most women in our correctional system.

The articles written about Martha Stewart's experiences with incarceration inform readers about women's prisons to some extent; however, the elements that these articles highlight are far from the critical issues plaguing these institutions. Instead of discussing hours

spent playing games, cooking in the microwave, visiting friends and families, and strolling among the trees and cottages, these articles could have used this particular case as a forum for a larger discussion on the problems with women's prisons. Women's institutions may appear to be less harsh than men's prisons; however, these women are usually subjected to worse conditions than their male counterparts (Rafter, 1989). The only problem that is identified in any of these articles, and only briefly at that, is the distance between the institution and the women's hometowns. Women's prisons are also in need of educational and vocational programs, as well as specialized treatment programs (Belknap, 2001). Yet, other than the common discussion of requiring inmates to work while incarcerated there is little discussion of the need for these programs. Some of the articles include statements from Martha Stewart herself about the need for reform. The focus tends to be on sentencing and on the need to improve the food served in prison. The first is a critical issue for female prisoners; however, not much else is mentioned other than Martha Stewart's opinions of our nation's sentencing practices.

Overall, the images presented in the articles about Martha Stewart are potentially damaging. The general message is that women in prison are not being punished. They serve their time quite easily and transition back to their old lives with ease. Highlighting the ways that Martha Stewart benefited from her incarceration, whether it was through monetary gain or weight loss, further reinforces an image of prison as being too easy. Creating a false sense about the ability of our prison system to punish means that people may not question the problems with the system. Women are already cited as victims of the war on drugs and its punishment-based policies. These policies are disproportionately affecting poor, minority women and their children (Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004), leaving these women and their families marginalized even further in our society. According to Clark (2005), "if female prisoners were represented more accurately in the media, the public surely would be more inclined to pressure politicians to pay attention to a population that is all too easy to ignore" (p. 95).

So why ignore the realities and focus on a unique inmate like Martha Stewart? The main reason is because Martha Stewart going to prison is considered newsworthy, as is the incarceration of most celebrities; however, the reason is likely deeper than a fascination with celebrity justice. In our society we expect men to be violent and thus, are not surprised when they are incarcerated. The same can be said of the typical female offender in our prison system. Minority women who commit crimes, particularly violent crimes, have been masculinized in the media (see Chesney-Lind, 1999). Because of this vision of minority female offenders, their incarceration may not be considered newsworthy. For instance, consider rap star Lil' Kim, who was sentenced to one year in federal prison in 2005 and did not receive nearly as much media attention as Martha Stewart. It was newsworthy that she was convicted and incarcerated; yet, the fascination with her imprisonment was notably absent. Martha Stewart, on the other hand, is different. She meets many of the gender expectations placed on white females, with one exception—her aggressiveness in the business world. So, her incarceration was considered newsworthy. It almost served to put her in her place, especially through the news media's focus on the feminine aspect of the prison system. Overwhelmingly, she is depicted as being on the same level as the other females incarcerated in our country. This portrayal may not be very damaging to Martha Stewart, who has done remarkably well since leaving prison, but it is harmful to many of the other women incarcerated in our country.

Most people should recognize that Martha Stewart is not a typical inmate; however, with limited knowledge of the correctional system and its population they are far from recognizing the reality faced by most female inmates. This is compounded by the normalization of Martha Stewart's prison experiences in the newspaper coverage of her case. This pattern is likely to continue unless we actively find ways to make information on female prisoners available. Chesney-Lind (1999) believes that the people who are most knowledgeable about female offenders must challenge the images presented by the media. In order to do this, feminist criminologists and others who work with and study female offenders must be proactive and "actively seek ways to build alliances, and build credibility, with progressive journalists, to construct better coverage of crime issues" (Chesney-Lind, 1999, p. 134). Thus, one way to ensure that alternative and more accurate views of women in prison are presented in the media is to follow the steps of criminologists such as Meda Chesney-Lind and Beth Richie and make ourselves known and available to journalists and other media sources. Making these connections may not ensure that more newspaper articles are written about women in prison; however, it is a way to increase the chances that when these articles are written, they contain more vital information on the female prison population. Only then will the public have a true understanding of the female prisoners and the institutions that they are incarcerated in.

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