

# **The Perceived Role of Mass Media Use during Incarceration in the Light of Prisoners' Re-entry into Society**

**By**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article explores the relationship between individuals' media use during incarceration and their re-entry experience. Previous research suggests that mass media may facilitate the transition from prison to the free world because they can normalise life in the penitentiary and keep prisoners informed about major events and developments in society. The findings of a quantitative study into the media use and reality perceptions of long-term prisoners, and a qualitative study into the re-entry experience and the perceived importance of mass media use during incarceration in the light of this experience, suggest that media are a necessary but insufficient condition for a smooth re-entry.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The re-entry phase is often considered a crucial element in the reintegration process of ex-prisoners, because the sort of adaptation that people make during their first days in the free world directly affects their chances of recidivism (Waller, 1974, p. 72). Criminologists often concentrate on a few variables that characterize the early living situation – such as family relationships, work and housing – to predict the failures and successes (see e.g., Goethals, Bogaerts, & Maes, 2000; Marshall, 1992). Little attention, however, is paid to the full range of problems that accompany the transition from prison to society and to the perspective of the returnees.

Another gap in the existing research concerns the relationship between mass media use during imprisonment and the re-entry process.<sup>1</sup> While most authors acknowledge that the post-prison situation is best understood within a longitudinal framework, which takes into account the individuals' pre-prison situation and their reaction to confinement (Travis & Visser, 2003), very few have concentrated on the influence these specific kinds of prison activities have on release. More common, for instance, are studies that focus on the effects individuals' participation in vocational training, substance abuse treatment, and education during incarceration, have on their post-prison situation (Austin, 2001; Travis & Petersilia, 2001).

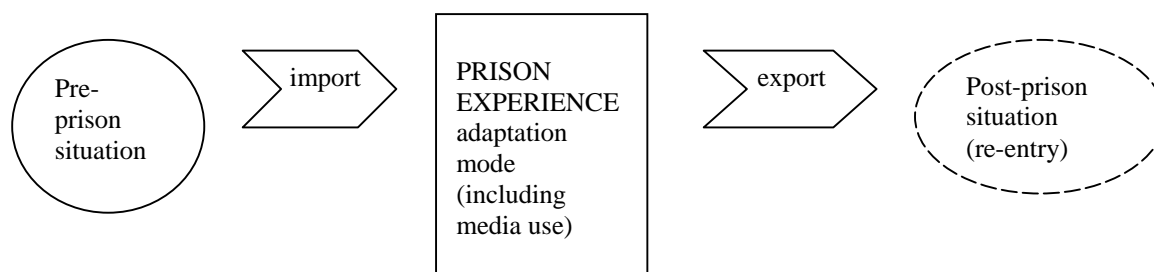
This article, therefore, pays attention to the re-entry experiences of prisoners and the importance of mass media use during incarceration in the light of their release. The literature review starts with a description of the general underlying longitudinal framework. After that, the findings of earlier research into the experiences of returnees and into the media use of prisoners will be discussed. The empirical part of this article describes the results of a quantitative and qualitative study among (ex-)prisoners, which explored the possible (long-term) effects of media use on long-term prisoners' knowledge and perceptions of the outside world, and the perceived importance of mass media use during incarceration among people with a re-entry experience.

### *The post-prison situation in a longitudinal framework*

Figure 1 illustrates how the post-prison situation of a person is affected by his or her prison experience and pre-prison condition. The relationships between these three situations are described in the criminological “importation” and “exportation” models, which emphasize that people transport aspects from one setting to another. The deprivation model, on the other hand, pays attention to the most central aspect in this process: the typical character of the prison environment (Goodstein & Wright, 1989, pp. 229-239). The prison adaptation style is a function of prisoners’ imported background characteristics and their depriving environment, and an important mediator of prison outcomes. As is demonstrated later, this adaptation style is also characterized by specific media uses.

**Figure 1**

#### *The Post-Prison Situation Placed within a Longitudinal Framework*



The deprivation approach emphasizes the influence of the frustrating prison context on the problems that prisoners experience and on their psychological and behavioural adaptation to this situation. This model argues that prisoners try to soften the well known ‘pains of imprisonment’ (Sykes, 1958) or “environmental concerns” (Toch, 1977), such as the deprivation of liberty, autonomy, goods and services, heterosexual contacts, safety, privacy, structure, support, emotional feedback, activity, communication (Keve, 1974, p. 33), and variety (Cooke, Baldwin, & Howison, 1990).

The importation model, on the other hand, emphasises that the lifestyles of prisoners are strongly determined by their background characteristics. This approach states that the socio-demographic and criminal profile of individuals influences their evaluation of, and reaction to, confinement. The importation model also mentions the existence of stressors outside the prison environment. These ‘imported’ stressors refer to pressures originating from the broader environment (e.g., the non-transparency of the sentencing and release policies in a country; Parisi, 1982, p. 13), or pressures related to the past or the future of the prisoner, such as feelings of guilt concerning the crime or doubts about life after prison (Neys, 1994, p. 195-196).

Because both approaches have shown their value and are not incompatible, the psychological and behavioural reactions of prisoners to their confinement can best be described as a complex product of their imported characteristics and their (stressful) environment (Johnson & Toch, 1982). These specific adaptation strategies, in their turn, are considered to mediate the (long-term) effects of imprisonment on post-release outcomes, which are emphasized in the exportation model. Some of the possible prison impacts, which are dysfunctional in periods of post-prison adjustment, are: (a) high dependency on

institutional structures or the reduced capacity for independent thought and action; (b) hypervigilance; (c) interpersonal distrust and suspicion; (d) diminished self-worth; (e) criminalisation; (f) estrangement; (g) disculturation (the loss or failure to acquire some of the habits currently required in the wider society; (h) isolation; and (i) stigmatization (for an overview see Atlas & Dunham, 1990, p. 54; Cooke et al., 1990, pp. 58-59; Goffman, 1968, p. 70).

Classifications of adaptation or coping strategies reveal two dimensions that are particularly important in the light of prisoners' reintegration into society: (a) inmates' concentration on the outside versus the prison world during incarceration, and (b) prisoners' intention to proceed or to change their former (criminal) lifestyle on release. The most vulnerable category of prisoners consists of persons who cut themselves off from the outside world (usually because they have no intensive personal relationships with people from outside), and try to construct a life in prison. These inmates, sometimes called "jailers" (Irwin, 1970), "the life" (Heffernan, 1972), or persons who adapt the "colonization" style (Goffman, 1968), are more likely to be the victim of institutionalisation and criminalisation (Goodstein & Wright, 1989), and therefore have fewer chances on successful reintegration in society after release. Prisoners who "glean" (Irwin, 1970) or adapt the "reconversion style" (Goffman, 1968) – an adaptation mode which is popular among long-termers (Flanagan, 1995, p. 113) – are oriented towards the outside world, and try to use their prison time profitably by doing things (such as following courses and therapies, or reading books) to improve or better themselves. Although these persons are highly motivated to lead a conventional lifestyle after prison, this option is not always so evident in practice. Many of them, for instance, lack first-hand knowledge of the social worlds they would like to enter (Irwin, 1970, p.105). Additionally, many have spent so much time in the institution, and missed many changes in the outside world, that successful reintegration is difficult. Those who concentrate on their life outside but do not plan to make dramatic changes in their (criminal or conventional) lifestyle are called "time doers" (Irwin, 1970, p. 67).

### *The re-entry experience*

The actual transition from prison to the community is in some ways similar to the re-entry experience of other returnees (e.g., people who have spent a considerable time abroad and then return to their home country; see Isa, 2000; Yoshida et al., 2002). The impact of the transplantation from one setting to another is often described as dramatic, stressful and disorienting. The re-entry shock appears to be caused by fundamental differences between the two settings (McArthur, 1974, p. 61), and the fact that the original setting to which one returns has changed over time (Taxman, Young, & Byrne, 2002, p. 97). The most ordinary skills and knowledge useful in the first setting have been lost or forgotten because they were not applicable in the second setting, and new physical and cultural patterns have occurred in the original setting during the absence. The returnees find themselves in an alien world and also feel like strangers. The new situation then seems to require adaptive reactions with regard to the physical surroundings, the human environment, and the self.

The limited literature on the re-entry experience of ex-prisoners (Eaton, 1993; Irwin, 1970, pp. 107-130; McArthur, 1974; Waller, 1974) suggests that the sensory experience of the new environment unsettles them in subtle ways. Ex-prisoners report, for instance, having to adjust to how quiet their homes are and to how rapidly everything moves outside, in contrast with the noisy and static prison environment. They also notice changes at the places they were once familiar with, such as new buildings and highways. The social environment,

too, requires adaptation. Ex-convicts sometimes have the feeling that, because of their imprisonment, they have (temporarily) lost their capacity to interact appropriately with people from outside. What was once a routine action, now demands considerable effort. For instance, taking a bus, or buying something at a shop may be a quite difficult task. In addition to the physical environment, the social environment has also altered during, and sometimes because of, incarceration. Ex-prisoners notice, for instance, changes in the relationships among family members or in the constellation of their peer group. Moreover, they experience the inability to relate to their former friends and family as they seem to have lost the basis for rapport with them. Ex-prisoners are thus in different ways confronted with the fact that time has not stood still while they were away. They are also fully aware that the prison experience has changed them – their self-image and the way they are perceived by others. A common feeling among people who have just been released from prison is that of being recognized as an ex-con. They think that their physical appearance and the way they behave (both aspects might be influenced by their incarceration) might give them away. This concern relates to the unfavorable social status of ex-prisoners and its possible negative consequences.

After release, prisoners have to adapt to a new environment; a setting that differs from the prison setting and from the original physical and social setting before incarceration. Finding shelter and a job, and getting involved in new meaningful personal relationships, appear to be crucial, but seldom easy, steps in the reintegration process (Waller, 1974, p.71). Stigmatization or labeling (Cavadino & Dignan, 1992, p. 34) often forms a serious barrier for those who pursue a crime-free, conventional life. The disappointment that goes along with unsuccessful initial integration attempts may feed the idea that nothing will ever change and lead to recidivism.

As indicated by the longitudinal model mentioned above, the re-entry experience is not uniform. The kind of problems that returnees experience will depend on a number of variables, such as the length of their imprisonment, their prison adaptation style, family situation, socio-economic profile, etcetera.

### ***Media use in prison***

The existing literature suggests that media may influence the re-entry experience in two ways. Mass media can (a) normalize life in the penitentiary and (b) keep inmates informed about changes in society.

Research shows that media activities can prevent, solve or at least soften the pains of imprisonment. Prisoners may, for instance, listen to the radio or watch television to banish disturbing noises and to get some privacy; use the media to pass time or to keep busy; follow news reports to stay in touch with the outside world and feel less isolated; listen to their 'own' music to strengthen their self image; consume erotic media contents to become sexually aroused; read exciting books to break down the monotony of their daily prison life; make use of the media to have a conversational topic or to banish loneliness; attend movies or go to the library to get out of their cell. Even when media activities do not classify as (partial) solutions for certain prison problems, they can support other problem focused coping reactions by suggesting solutions to the problem, stimulating the redefinition of the situation, providing distraction, and furnishing themes for wishful thinking and daydreaming. Negative emotions can be suppressed or expressed by media activities, and even some physical side effects of stress (such as insomnia) can be remedied, for example, by watching television (for an overview of media functions in prison, see Auberson, 1973; Clemmer, 1958; Fabiani &

Soldini, 1996; Galtung, 1967; Jewkes, 2002; Lindlof, 1986, 1987; Vandebosch, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2001a, 2001b, 2003). Media thus have the potential to reduce prison stresses and their supposed (long-term) negative impacts (cfr. supra). In this way the media indirectly improves the chances for a successful re-entry.

Mass media also foster reintegration into society in a more direct way. They keep inmates – at least those who are still interested in life outside (e.g., “gleaners” and “time doers”) – informed about major events and evolutions in society, such as price evolutions (Lindlof, 1987, p. 190), and the emancipation of women (Fisher, 1989). This up-to-date knowledge reduces the release anxiety and the feeling of estrangement among prisoners. For persons who try to use their prison time profitably, the consumption of certain media contents (such as books, informative TV programs) is seen as an activity to improve or better themselves, and a way to fight mental deterioration. Gleaners may also rely on mass media to get a better idea of the conventional life they want to pursue after release (Irwin, 1970, p. 79). Finally, mass media can be used to make some practical arrangements when release is in prospect. Job and housing sections in newspapers can guide the search for employment and shelter (Waller, 1974, p. 73; Lindlof, 1987, p. 190). Personal ads may help prisoners find a new partner (Auberson, 1973, pp. 137-138).

Studies indicate, however, that media are not always beneficial to prisoners; they may cause “non-gratifications” and induce stress (and should therefore be avoided). Lindlof (1987, p. 187), for example, notes that the absence of heterosexual relations leads to occasional withdrawal from erotic contents because they remind prisoners of their deprivation. Some authors also suggest that mass media create an unrealistic image of society (i.e., of females and violence) in the heads of prisoners – and in this way hinder their successful reintegration (Irwin, 1970, p. 138; Slater & Elliott, 1982). Furthermore, it appears that the presence of mass media may counter the institutional goal of “resocializing” inmates. Research shows, for instance, that the introduction of television in penitentiaries has had a negative effect on the participation rates in “resocialization” activities (Snacken, 1991, p. 41). Media may also support or strengthen criminal values and identities, inspire prisoners to lead a criminal life, and even give them useful information for planning criminal activities (Blumer & Hauser, 1970, pp. 66-67; Howitt, 1995). Finally, media are often considered an important source of stigmatization of (ex-) prisoners (Dotter, 2002; Eaton, 1993, pp. 61-62; Ferrell, 1999, p. 405). News reports on the law case of a person often have a profound, negative influence on his or her self-worth during incarceration (Neys, 1994, p. 195). Media notices about the release of a notorious prisoner are also believed to hinder his or her reintegration in society (Taxman et al., 2002, p. 92).

## METHOD

Building upon a previous study into the media use of prisoners and its short term gratifications (see Vandebosch, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2001a, 2001b, 2003), a second study was conducted that explored the (long-term) effects of media use during incarceration on the reality perceptions of long-term prisoners (since their long term imprisonment might render them most vulnerable for disculturation and estrangement effects). The exploration of this relationship was deemed important because prisoners’ re-entry into society might be influenced (i.e., facilitated or made more difficult) by their (right or wrong) impressions and knowledge about today’s society. Gaining more insight in the actual re-entry experience, and the (perceived) importance of mass media use during incarceration in the light of reintegration was the second objective. To meet these objectives a combination of

quantitative and qualitative research methods were used.

### *Quantitative study*

To gather information about the reality perceptions prisoners have, a survey was conducted in two Flemish penitentiaries. The correctional institutions of Leuven and Brugge were selected to participate in the research because they house many long-termers. The prison governors provided a list with the names of all Dutch-speaking prisoners with a sentence length of more than five years. These persons received a letter from the university announcing the research project and asking them to participate in the survey. On Friday the 4th of October 2002 the selected inmates received a postal package containing: an instructive letter and guidelines about how to fill in the questionnaire, two separate parts of the questionnaire, two envelopes and a pen. They were asked to fill out the two parts of the questionnaire and to send them back on time. Part One of the questionnaire (containing knowledge questions and first order cultivation items) had to be returned before Saturday at noon; the deadline for Part Two was Monday at noon. It was announced that persons who would participate in the survey, by completely filling out the two parts of the questionnaire, could win an amount of 25 Euro. In each institution, 20 winners would be randomly selected.

The above mentioned method was preferred above a face-to-face survey because the latter would be time consuming, especially given that the aim of the study was to reach as many long-termers as possible with limited human resources. To overcome the most serious disadvantage of a mail survey, a low response rate, incentives were used (i.e., a free pen and money). To improve the quality of the answers, guidelines for filling out the questionnaire were provided. The questionnaire also included items used in a previous prison survey, which had been shown to be understandable and clear for this population. Finally, measures were taken to limit the possibility of circulation of “right” answers among respondents; the first part of the questionnaire had to be returned quite soon after deliverance.

Part One of the questionnaire dealt with knowledge items. More specifically, it measured prisoners’ knowledge of news facts and stories (in a section with the heading “Quiz”), their knowledge of everyday phenomena (by means of story in which certain elements were omitted), their awareness of new products and trends in society, and so-called first order cultivation beliefs about crime phenomena, demographic variables and professions.

Part Two of the questionnaire included second order cultivation questions about law and order, sex roles, the environment, racism and technology. Furthermore, it measured prisoners’ perception of the problematic character of different societal issues. This part of the questionnaire also contained the ‘explanatory’ variables, such as media use items, prison related factors, and socio-demographic and criminal background variables. Information about the prisoners’ criminal past, sentence length and phase of imprisonment was also retrieved from official documents.

### *Qualitative study*

To gain a deeper insight in the re-entry experience and the perceived importance of media use during incarceration in the light of this experience, in-depth interviews were conducted. The target group for these interviews consisted of people with some kind of “prison release experience”: (a) ex-prisoners (released on parole, and contacted through the parole agency), (b) long-term prisoners who had already been on furlough during their

current sentence (in the prison of Oudenaarde), and (c) prisoners with a previous incarceration and release experience (after at least one year of imprisonment), who were currently staying at the prison for recidivists in Dendermonde. In both prisons, 13 people were randomly selected out of all persons that met the above mentioned conditions. Respectively, nine and eight inmates from the prisons of Oudenaarde and Dendermonde agreed to participate. In addition, the parole agency of Leuven provided the names of five ex-prisoners who consented.

The in-depth interviews focused on the following issues: (a) the prison experience and the way people prepared for their release during incarceration (stress and problem experience, coping style, participation in media and other activities, mental and behavioral preparation for release), (b) the actual furlough and release experience (feelings accompanying the transition phase, difficulties experienced, perceived differences between prison and home environment, perceived changes in home environment and society at large), and (c) the perceived importance of mass media use during incarceration in the light of release (would the release experience be different if there were no media in prison?). At the end of the interview, basic background information about the sociodemographic profile of the respondent at the time of his imprisonment and release was gathered by means of a short standardized questionnaire. In the case of prisoners, this information was complemented by data about the crimes in which they were convicted of, which were retrieved from official documents about their criminal past (i.e., their criminal record and current detention file).

The encounters with prisoners took place in a private room in the institutions (in October and November 2001). The interviews with ex-prisoners were conducted in the researcher's office at the university, and, in one case, in a private room at the parole office. The length of these semi-structured interviews varied from one to two hours. All of them were recorded on tape, literally transcribed and analyzed with NUD\*IST (a software package for the analysis of qualitative data).

## RESULTS

### *Quantitative study*

***Sociodemographic and criminal background characteristics.*** A total of 178 prisoners participated in the survey: 107 of them were serving their sentence in the penitentiary in Brugge and 71 respondents were staying in the prison of Leuven. The response rates were 74.8% and 40.6%, respectively. The youngest respondent was 21 while the oldest was 71. The mean age was 40 ( $SD = 11.4$ ). As expected, the average education level was low: 56.2% ( $n = 100$ ) had, at the most, a diploma of lower secondary education.

Sixty-one percent ( $n = 109$ ) of the respondents mentioned an earlier prison experience (a pre-trial detention or imprisonment). A classification of prisoners on the basis of their principal current offense showed that 39.3% ( $n = 70$ ) of the respondents were convicted of murder or manslaughter, 18.0% ( $n = 32$ ) of (aggravated) theft, 16.8% ( $n = 30$ ) of sex offenses, 10.1% ( $n = 18$ ) of several (equally serious) offenses of varying nature, 9.0% ( $n = 16$ ) of drug offenses, and 3.4% ( $n = 6$ ) of 'other' offenses.

The mean sentence length was 5443 days ( $SD = 3573.9$ ), or almost 15 years. Although the study was aimed at long-termers, it appeared that 15.2% ( $n = 27$ ) of the respondents were serving a sentence of less than 5 years. These prisoners all stayed at the section for long-

termers in the penitentiary of Brugge – probably because of overcrowding in the other male section – of which the residents were all considered potential respondents during the sampling phase.

None of the respondents had just arrived in prison (i.e., were there for less than a month); 37.6% ( $n = 67$ ) of them found themselves in the legal conditions for an early release (and thus in the last phase of their imprisonment). The mean time served on the current sentence was 1627 days (about 4.5 years;  $SD = 1472.8$ ). The most recently imprisoned person had only spent 3 months of his current sentence in the penitentiary. The respondent with the longest current prison experience was incarcerated on March 19, 1973.

**Participation in prison activities.** The data about the respondents' participation in media and other prison activities confirmed the trends observed in the first prison study (Vandebosch, 1999). The (predominantly) long-term prisoners often tried to use their time profitably by doing things to "improve" themselves (41.0%,  $n = 73$ ). Many of them worked (80.9%,  $n = 144$ ), read books (65.2%,  $n = 116$ ) or followed courses (56.2%,  $n = 100$ ). The same attitude was reflected by their media use. The average television viewing time for this sub-population (303 minutes per day,  $SD = 194.2$ ) was lower than the average viewing time for the general prison population (339 minutes per day; Vandebosch, 1999) and the main reason to watch TV was "to get informed" (53.4%,  $n = 95$ ). The top five most liked television programs consisted of: documentaries ( $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = .648$ ) on a scale of four, ranging from: "don't like to watch this at all" (1) to "like to watch it very much" (4), the news ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = .670$ ), informative programs ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = .724$ ), scientific programs ( $M = 3.18$ ,  $SD = .944$ ) and quizzes ( $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = .952$ ). Similar content preferences were displayed for other media. The Flemish news magazine "Knack", "National Geographic" and "Eos" (a science magazine) were quite popular among long-termers, and many of them were strongly interested in scientific news. Apart from their intention to use their time in prison profitably, the availability of these magazines in the prison in Leuven (at a low price) could explain these findings.

**Knowledge about current affairs.** The prisoners' knowledge and perceptions about the outside world were measured in different ways. A small quiz tested their knowledge about current affairs (sports, economics, politics, showbiz and crime and justice). It was expected that prisoners would know a lot about things they were often confronted with in prison (e.g., Who is the current Minister of Justice?) or with which they were familiar because of their criminal background (e.g., Which role will prosecutor Bourlet presumably play during the Dutroux process?). The opposite was predicted for novelties in society with which prisoners had little or no direct experience because of their (long term) incarceration (e.g., What is the color of a 20 Euro bill?, WWW is the abbreviation of .... ?). The quiz also included an item that measured prisoners' knowledge about an issue that was important in the light of their reintegration (e.g., "What is the name of the computer with job offerings from the VDAB [the Flemish employment office]"?).

The data showed that, generally speaking, prisoners were quite well informed about current affairs. Almost all prisoners (94.9%,  $n = 169$ ) knew the name of the current Minister of Justice, and an equal proportion knew the name of the successful Flemish girls group "K3". Most respondents also filled in the exact date of the World Trade Center attacks (82.0%,  $n = 146$ ), knew the country of origin of the (future) wife of the Dutch Crown Prince (76.4%,  $n = 136$ ), could mention the color of a 20 Euro bill (although many of them were incarcerated before the Euro was introduced, and no money circulation was allowed in



prison; 61.8%,  $n = 110$ ) and knew the “WIS” computer (which was also present in one of the penitentiaries; 62.4%,  $n = 111$ ).

While only a minority of the respondents could give the exact answer to the questions regarding the WWW (40.4%,  $n = 72$ ), the name of the recently introduced Belgian prison journal, which appeared to be unavailable in the penitentiaries included in this study (1.7%,  $n = 3$ ), and the new Belgian airline company (20.2%,  $n = 36$ ), many others could give an answer that was at least partly correct (they mentioned for instance: the “World Wide Website”, or gave the name of a local prison brochure). Only knowledge with regard to events in very specific domains (e.g., the name of the winner of the Flemish cycling event “De Ronde van Vlaanderen” – 2002) and the knowledge about more complex issues (the composition of the Flemish government) were really limited. Respectively, 7.9% ( $n = 14$ ) and 10.7% ( $n = 19$ ) of the respondents answered these sports and political questions correctly.

**Everyday knowledge.** The re-entry literature suggests that people who are released after a long prison stay experience difficulties with everyday routines such as taking a bus or going to a grocery store. Therefore, this situational knowledge was also tested by means of a story in which certain elements were omitted. The respondents were asked to fill in the open spaces. In most instances the answers referred to everyday phenomena (the price of bus tickets, current payment methods in shops, aspects of today’s traffic situation in Belgium, etc.) for which there was an “outdated” and a “correct” answer. The data showed that the majority of the respondents (spontaneously) mentioned up-to-date information (see Table 1).

**Estimates of prevalence of societal phenomena.** Apart from prisoners’ knowledge of news facts and their knowledge of everyday routines, their estimates of the prevalence of certain phenomena (such as the penetration of new technologies and products, the percentage of women and men in specific job categories, and the prevalence of crime-related phenomena) were measured (see Table 2). The respondents had to make a forced choice between two answers (a right and a wrong answer). Again, it appeared that long-term prisoners had a quite accurate picture of the outside world. Only the estimated numbers of males in “female” professions and females in “male” professions appeared to be incorrect in most cases. That is, the prisoners tended to have quite traditional job perceptions. On the other hand, it was clear that their (inter)personal experience with crime had influenced their answers about law and order phenomena. Many of them, for instance, overestimated the proportion of men working in law enforcement and thought that the proportion of criminals released for procedural error was very low (see Vandebosch, 2003).

**Reintegration attitudes.** Finally, the respondents’ answers to the reintegration statements showed that a majority of them had a positive outlook on life after prison. The majority believed that they could rely on other people upon release (64.6%,  $n = 115$ ), thought they would get a second chance (64.1%,  $n = 114$ ), and minimized the adjustment or estrangement problems (65.1%,  $n = 116$ ). Most respondents also thought that the prison context provided them with enough opportunities to work at their future (67.4%,  $n = 120$ ).

**Table 1****Results for the Everyday Knowledge Test**

Story elements	% of respondents giving this answer
<b>“I paid ..... for a bus ticket.” (n = 174)</b>	
<1 Euro	9.2
1 Euro	56.3
>1 and <2 Euro	9.8
2 Euro	5.7
> 2 Euro	4.6
Blank	14.4
<b>“The youngsters on the bus were holding a.... These devices are so popular nowadays.” (n = 173)</b>	
Mobile phone	80.9
Ticket	6.9
Brief case	4.6
Gameboy	4.0
Laptop	1.2
Playstation	0.6
Umbrella	0.6
Blank	1.2
<b>“Where there used to be crossroads, there were now...” (n = 173)</b>	
Rotaries	89.0
Other	6.9
Blank	4.0
<b>“The traffic lights were painted ... (colors).”(n = 171)</b>	
Yellow and black (correct answer)	64.3
Red and white (outdated answer)	18.1
Other	15.8
Blank	1.8
<b>“I went to my bank...(name of bank).”(n = 171)</b>	
New name	77.8
Old name	14.6
Blank	7.6
<b>“I didn’t pay with cash but with ...”(n = 171)</b>	
Bank card	90.6
Cheque	1.8
Other	7.0
Blank	0.6
<b>“I paid.... for a cup of coffee.” (n = 167)</b>	
< 1 Euro	2.4
1 Euro	13.2
1-1.50 Euro	22.2
1.5 Euro	37.1
1.5 - 2 Euro	4.8
2 Euro	13.8
> 2 Euro	4.2
Blank	2.4

**Table 2***Estimates of the Prevalence of Societal Phenomena*

Estimates (forced choice, * correct answer)	<i>n</i> % of respondents giving this answer
% of Belgian households with an internet connection	176
26	60.8
36 *	39.2*
% of Belgian households with a micro wave oven	176
55	25.0
64*	75.0*
% of Belgians having a mobile telephone	176
65	31.3
75*	68.8*
% of Belgians having a car	174
36	27.6
46*	72.4*
Number of privately owned firearms in Belgium	174
2 million*	56.9*
2.5 million	43.1
% of prison guards that are female	177
6	53.1
10*	46.9*
% of bus drivers that are female	176
6	62.5
11*	37.5*
% of flight attendants that are male	177
23	87.0
37*	13.0*
% of nursing staff that are male	174
6	43.7
10*	56.3*
% of all males who have jobs, working as a police officer, investigator or private detective	175
1*	56.6*
5	43.4
% of criminals released due to procedural error	174
1*	91.4*
10	8.6

***Prison adaptation styles.*** The above mentioned data thus provided a positive image of long-term prisoners: They tried to use their prison time profitably by doing things to improve themselves, were highly interested in the outside world and also informed about events and trends in contemporary society. Furthermore, they displayed a positive outlook on their future life outside the prison walls. Further analyses, however, indicated that this was true for most, but certainly not for all respondents. Apart from the group long-termers who adapted the “gleaning” style, there was an important group of “jailers” (and “time doers”). While the gleaners’ existing personal ties with the outside world seemed to stimulate their (media) interest in, and knowledge of, current events and trends in society (see Table 3), the lack of personal ties encouraged a stronger involvement in the prison culture and a disinterest in

society among jailers. Jailers were, therefore, doubly disadvantaged in the light of their reintegration into society. That is, they lacked personal resources they could rely on and they feared estrangement from the rest of society.

**Table 3**

***Means and One-Way Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) for Effects of Prison Adaptation Style on Media Use and Reintegration Attitudes***

	Doing Time <i>M (SD)</i>	Gleaning <i>M (SD)</i>	Jailing <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>F</i> (between groups, within groups)
<b>TV use</b>				
Viewing time per week (minutes)	2471 (1683)	2059 (1163)	1655 (989)	3.975* (2, 160)
Frequency watching TV news	5.91 (.288)	5.71 (.879)	5.20 (.997)	8.739*** (2, 155)
Romantic TV	2.50 (1.009)	2.91 (.800)	2.50 (.923)	3.958* (2, 150)
Medical fiction	1.93 (1.034)	2.40 (1.095)	2.00 (.964)	3.514* (2, 151)
Quizzes	3.09 (1.005)	3.39 (.752)	2.72 (1.099)	5.598** (2, 150)
Informative prog.	3.36 (.778)	3.66 (.533)	3.20 (.805)	5.811** (2, 153)
Crime watch prog.	2.75 (.995)	2.93 (1.027)	2.00 (.845)	9.203*** (2, 150)
Preference TV news	3.64 (.557)	3.65 (.675)	3.03 (.669)	11.309*** (2, 154)
Showbizz TV	2.35 (1.022)	2.48 (1.052)	1.86 (.875)	3.840* (2, 150)
<b>Other media</b>				
Preference radio news	3.25 (.670)	3.28 (.904)	2.76 (1.091)	3.384* (2, 122)
Interest in job ads	0.93 (1.104)	1.75 (1.100)	1.06 (1.056)	7.452*** (2, 112)
<b>Interest in news categories</b>				
Political news	1.31 (1.173)	1.84 (.895)	1.32 (.945)	5.316** (2, 156)
Social news	1.66 (.909)	1.84 (.748)	1.32 (.950)	10.182*** (2, 157)
Economical news	1.05 (1.050)	1.62 (.947)	1.32 (1.107)	5.001** (2, 157)
Lifestyle news	1.63 (.963)	1.79 (.946)	1.28 (.958)	3.065* (2, 158)
Environmental news	1.64 (.943)	2.14 (.761)	1.71 (.902)	6.045** (2, 155)
Local news	2.10 (.885)	2.04 (.818)	1.53 (.983)	4.908** (2, 159)
Home news	2.44 (.749)	2.41 (.748)	1.94 (.929)	4.846** (2, 158)
Foreign news	2.19 (.937)	2.27 (.792)	1.74 (1.125)	3.684* (2, 158)
<b>Participation in prison activities</b>				
Study	0.39 (.492)	0.74 (.458)	0.34 (.440)	13.382*** (2, 160)
Listen to music	0.53 (.504)	0.83 (.375)	0.81 (.397)	9.279*** (2, 160)
Read books	0.61 (.492)	0.82 (.387)	0.53 (.507)	5.849** (2, 160)
Pray	0.34 (.477)	0.44 (.500)	0.16 (.369)	4.040* (2, 161)
<b>Reintegration attitudes</b>				
Fearing estrangement	2.81 (.9122)	2.86 (.8657)	2.24 (.9437)	2.632 (2, 161)
Perceiving lack of support at release	1.87 (.7253)	1.88 (.7577)	2.65 (.8796)	12.912*** (2, 159).
Having negative thoughts about future	2.54 (.8046)	2.24 (.7496)	2.99 (.7898)	10.054*** (2, 156)
Believing they will get a second chance	3.31 (.9332)	3.67 (.9388)	2.89 (.8589)	8.353*** (2, 160)

Note. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

*Qualitative study*

In what follows, the results of the qualitative study are presented. To gain a first insight into the re-entry experience and the possible positive or negative effects of media use during incarceration on the transition phase, in-depth interviews with men with a release experience (consisting of 17 prisoners and 5 ex-prisoners) were conducted. The sample consisted of equal numbers of those in their 20s ( $n = 7$ ), 30s ( $n = 7$ ) and 40s ( $n = 7$ ). Only one person belonged to an older age category; he was 62. Most respondents ( $n = 19$ ) were Belgian, two were Turkish and one was of Moroccan nationality. With regard to their sentence length, the distribution was as follows: a small minority ( $n = 3$ ) had a sentence of less than 5 years, 11 persons had a sentence from 5 to 10 years, and 8 respondents had a sentence of more than 10 years.

The data show that coming out of prison was accompanied with positive and/or negative arousal. Some respondents mentioned they were “delighted” or “extremely happy” (“I could kiss a tree”), others were “overwhelmed” or “nervous”. Still others experienced both kinds of feelings at the same time when they walked through the prison doors and entered the free world. Only persons who had spent a very short term in prison were less impressed. They compared their re-entry with “returning from a holiday”

*I: How was it to leave prison ?*

R 11: That’s the best day of your life. Really. The best day of your life....

*I: And how did you feel ?*

R 11: Good... But the first time, when I had spent a year in prison... I came out...I was a little paranoid. I was a little bit afraid. I don’t know why. I was on the street. I had the feeling that people were staring at me, that they knew I came from prison. Really...

Upon release (or during their prison furloughs) the respondents noticed that they were entering a different world. The outside world was not the same place as before their incarceration, and obviously different from the prison world. During their imprisonment, several changes had taken place in the physical and social environment, on both a personal and a societal level. The respondents mentioned, for instance, that the trees in their garden had grown, or that the furniture in their home had been replaced. Their children had become big and their parents seemed to have shrunk. Some friends had gotten married and others divorced. The neighborhood, too, looked different, with new shops, buildings and streets (while others had disappeared). Some respondents blamed these changes for the difficulties they experienced when trying to find their way in the city, others mentioned they had just forgotten the easiest way to get from one place to another. The feeling of being a stranger, of course, was more prominent among respondents who did not return to their previous personal environment, for instance, because (a) they had lost contact with their family during their prison stay, (b) they wanted to start a new life at a different place, or (c) they were legally obliged to stay away from their home town.

The released prisoners also noticed changes at the societal level. They mentioned the widespread use of mobile phones, the introduction of new types of cars and fashions, the increased prosperity, the busy traffic, and the growing egocentrism of people, as eye-catching “novelties”.

*I: And did you experience any problems with daily routines, such as going to a shop or... ?*

R10: No, that's... I think it is like swimming or riding a bike, once you've learned that, you can swim and ride a bike for the rest of your life. I mean...If you go shopping...Little has changed...Yeah, of course you can now pay with a credit card everywhere....But what did surprise me a lot was the use of mobile telephones. Oh...that was terrible! Before my imprisonment mobile phones already existed, of course, but they were only used by businessmen who were sitting in a restaurant...and everyone thought it was irritating. They were exceptions. They really were. And that is something you notice when you have been out of society for a long time... If you live outside...the evolution of mobile phones...nobody has ever questioned that... It's normal that something evolves...And now, suddenly, everyone has a cellular... from one day to another... But in reality it has taken a longer time.... But for people who have lived in society all the time...they all have accepted that. Everyone has accepted that... Whether they are 12 years old, or 85...Everybody has a mobile... And that was terrible to notice, because you don't know that phenomenon. I didn't have a mobile phone before I went to prison. As I said before, nobody did. And then you come out of prison, and everyone has one. And they don't only use it when they really have to, they use it all the time, for all different purposes...It has really become an addiction. I mean... I also have a mobile phone now. But everyone hates me because of the way I use my mobile phone: I often don't have my phone with me, or it's turned off, or the batteries are empty... I seldom use it, because I haven't been through that stadium wherein everyone considered it normal....

Although the (ex-)prisoners considered television as their window to the outside world during their imprisonment, and believed that mass media indeed had helped them to keep up to date with trends in society, the “preparatory” power of the media was obviously not perfect. Several explanations were offered for this finding. According to the respondents, some prisoners (jailers) were just not interested in what was happening outside. These inmates were believed to avoid new programs and, consequently, to experience more adjustment problems upon release. Furthermore, the respondents underlined that the evolutions and trends that were highlighted in the (news)media were not always relevant in the personal sphere (and the other way around - what was relevant in the personal sphere was not always reported on in the news or the media in general). Finally, the media experience of a phenomenon was said to be very different from the real life experience.

R6 (male, prison of Dendermonde, second study): Seeing things, or experiencing things... That's a big difference. Like I told you about that tree that I could kiss when I was released... I saw so many trees on TV while I was in prison ... But feeling it, was quite different. I mean, that experience...All that noise on the streets...

R20 (male, prison of Oudenaarde, first study): The way people dressed had changed a lot during those 4 years....I mean... Here we wear prison clothes, or we only see fashion on TV, but if you see it in real life... It's different. ....It's strange. Or cars that have changed. ... You see them on TV, but outside you see so many cars that have changed.... It's strange. ....And you don't see everything on TV. You only see news events or short fragments...But outside you see everything...Non-stop.

The changes in the outside world made prisoners realize that time had not stood still while they were away, and that they themselves had probably also changed during, and

because of, their imprisonment. They had, for instance, adjusted to the prison environment with its own physical features, routines, inhabitants and codes of conduct, and imported into the free world some of the behaviors and ways of thinking that were functional in the prison setting. Seeing the contrasts between the two settings, this “prison baggage” caused adaptation problems upon release. For example, respondents mentioned that they had to adjust to the multitude of sensory sensations, the noise, the open spaces, the regained autonomy, and so on. Some of the negative things that were learned in prison and that hindered a successful reintegration were: distrust in people, indifference to violence, criminal knowledge, prison slang, a bad living rhythm, drug abuse, and an addiction to sleep medication. On the other hand, the prison experience also seemed to have had positive effects. Some respondents, for instance, learned to appreciate their family and the “little things in life”, gained a deeper insight into who they were, got off drugs, became less violent, or followed vocational training.

Although the respondents believed that the presence of mass media in the penitentiaries could indeed reduce stress levels and make prison life more similar to life outside the prison walls, being incarcerated obviously remains a very “abnormal” experience. Therefore, intensive re-adaptation efforts were needed upon release.

*I: Do you think it makes any difference – having television or not in prison – when you are released?*

R 17: Uh, sure! Sure!

*I: In what way?*

R 17: I mean, if we...if you have television...that’s relaxing. You look at what’s going on, you watch the news...You still know what’s happening in the world. This minister has died, the King had a heart operation, or... I don’t know. We follow that... Then, if we come out, we can still have a conversation : « Last year this happened... » Even if you’d been in prison, you’d seen that.... If they would tell me: 1 year in prison, without television... I don’t think I would make it... Really... Or you should read books...But I don’t like reading, that’s the problem. But I do like watching television....

*I: Watching TV is mainly for entertainment then, or is it also... ?*

R: Relaxation, too, of course... But also... You read while you watch a movie or a documentary...You read the subtitles... So your mind is busy. And if you watch a movie, an exciting movie, then you’re out of prison. It’s just like you’re at home. That’s the feeling you get. And then...the news... You also watch the news when you’re at home.... You don’t see those bars anymore...You’re free! But what if you don’t have a television set? What do you do then? You lie on your bed, you sleep... How long can you do that? And there are people who don’t have a television set in prison, because they don’t have any money... It’s a shame. That shouldn’t be allowed... Because the purpose here is...if someone enters prison.... I mean. Ok, you’ve done something wrong...but...it’s not good that you turn crazy in prison...They shouldn’t make people crazy in prison, and then release them... He’s a danger to himself then....If you don’t have television.... Ok, you can survive it, but it’s difficult... If you take away television, it’s normal that a person deteriorates...

Thus, in the eyes of (ex-)prisoners, media are of vital importance during imprisonment, but the perceived positive effects on reentry are rather limited.

## DISCUSSION

Criminologists acknowledge that the post-prison situation is best understood within a longitudinal framework that takes into account the individuals' pre-prison situation and their reaction to confinement. Based on data from a large-scale Flemish study among (ex-) prisoners, this article explored the media uses of prisoners and their possible positive or negative effects on the re-entry phase. This phase is often described as a crucial element in the reintegration process.

The transition from prison to community is in some ways similar to the re-entry experience of other "returnees". The impact of the transplantation from one setting to another is often described as stressful. More in particular, the re-entry shock appears to be caused by fundamental differences between the two settings, and the fact that the original setting to which one returns has changed over time. The most ordinary skills and knowledge useful in the original setting have been lost or forgotten because they were not applicable in the second setting while other habits and routines have developed in the latter, which might be dysfunctional or irrelevant in the first. Additionally, new physical and cultural patterns have developed in the original setting during the absence.

In the prison setting, changing existing (negative) habits and creating new routines is often part of the re-socialization goal of the institution. By organizing therapy sessions and vocational training, and by handling a strict work schedule, penitentiaries try to solve existing drug or alcohol abuse problems and to develop the skills, knowledge and routines necessary to lead a non-criminal life.

On the other hand, the criminological literature extensively describes the unintended negative consequences of a (long term) prison stay that hinder ex-prisoners' reintegration attempts. Some of these dysfunctional incarceration effects are: (a) high dependency on institutional structures or the reduced capacity for independent thought and action, (b) hyper vigilance, (c) interpersonal distrust and suspicion, (d) diminished self-worth, (e) criminalization, (f) estrangement, (g) disculturation, and (h) isolation.

Mass media may facilitate prisoners' re-entry into society by normalizing prison life and softening the prison experience. In this way they help to reduce the possible negative consequences of incarceration and improve the chances of a successful re-entry. Mass media also foster reintegration into society in a more direct way by keeping inmates informed about major events and evolutions in society, and by providing them with practical information (e.g., about the job market) useful in planning a conventional lifestyle. Television, newspapers, radio, and magazines may also, however, have the opposite effect. They sometimes can induce stress, provide prisoners with a distorted view of reality, or support criminalization.

Flemish as well as other studies show that the psychological adaptation mode is an important intervening variable. The adaptation mode is a function of the interaction between imported characteristics and the specific prison context, and influences in its turn (the positive versus negative) use of media (in the light of reintegration). The most positive adaptive mode is the "gleaning" style, which is more common among long-termers, and especially among those persons who still have (strong) personal ties with the outside world. These prisoners try to use their time profitably by doing things to better themselves and to prepare for re-entry. Gleaners prefer informational and intellectual media contents and also



posses the greatest knowledge of events and trends in society. The most negative adaptation mode, the jailing style, is more typical for prisoners who have no or few personal contacts with the outside world and who feel unappreciated by society. These persons focus on life inside the prison walls and are most vulnerable to negative prison effects such as criminalization and disculturation.

The potentially positive effect of media use on the re-entry phase is also limited in other ways. The fact that the developments and trends that are highlighted in the media are not always relevant in the personal sphere (and the other way around – what is relevant in the personal sphere is not always reported on in the media) and the fact that the media experience of a phenomenon is very different from the real life experience, reduces the preparatory power of mass media in the light of re-entry. Furthermore, it is clear that the prison environment remains an abnormal and stressful environment despite the availability of TV sets, magazines, newspapers, etc.

Thus, in the prison context the mass media seem to be necessary, but insufficient. Penitentiaries should give inmates sufficient opportunities to keep informed about their home environment by allowing contacts with family members and friends via visits, telephone calls and letters. These personal ties are also important because they seem to have a great effect on prisoners' general interest in the outside world. Because the mediated and the interpersonal experience cannot replace the personal experience, however, measures that allow direct experience with the outside, such as prison furloughs, should be encouraged, especially in the case of long-term prisoners. Furthermore, policy measures should be taken to reduce the differences between the prison context and the free world, not only by providing inmates with a similar range of media facilities as people outside (at an affordable price), but also by other initiatives.

Finally, I would like to formulate some suggestions for future research. While the above mentioned studies focused mainly on measuring the media uses and (non-) gratifications in prison and their relationship with prisoners' knowledge and opinions about the outside world, and only explored the perceived effects of media use during incarceration on prisoners' re-entry, future research should investigate this link between media use in prison and ex-prisoners' reintegration into society more directly by employing a longitudinal, quantitative research design. Such a design should take into account prisoners' pre-prison situation, their reaction to confinement (especially in terms of media uses, positive versus negative imprisonment effects, and the interaction between these factors), and their re-entry experience (or more in general, their reintegration experience). This overview article of the positive potential of mass media in the light of prisoners' re-entry might function as a starting point for developing research questions and hypotheses.

## NOTES

1. For the purpose of this article, "mass media use" is defined as watching television, reading books, newspapers or magazines, and listening to the radio or recorded music.

## ENDNOTE

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