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Prison Radios: Communication on the Periphery of a Society

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ABSTRACT

In Hungary, it made nationwide news on the 14 October 2017 that the Hungarian Prison Service Headquarters decided to discontinue all kinds of cooperation and terminated the contracts with immediate effect with both the Helsinki Committee and the instead of Give Voice the official name of the Association is Speak Out ('Adj Hangot') Association – the legal entity operating prison radios in Hungary – in all three prisons¹ running this kind of media. The essay aims to sum up the history of prison radios in the UK and in Hungary with special attention to the role they may play in the inmates' resocialization process.

KEY WORDS

FoE – radio – prison – resocialization – community media

1. Resocialization in the Prison Services

The Prison Services currently serve two purposes. On the one hand, they are supposed to keep and maintain those sentenced by an independent court of law separated from society on a designated location. On the other hand, they are to do everything in their power to help prisoners in their reintegration into society, after their sentence's been served (Szabó, 2003). Both the purposes are stated in Hungarian law (Act CCXL of 2013 on the Enforcement of Criminal Punishments, Measures, Forced Measures and the Custodial Arrest imposed on Misdemeanours):

- “1. § (2) The order of the execution of sanctions and measures shall be designed in a way that
- a) it should promote the social integration and law-abiding behaviour of the convict beyond the enforcement of the penalty realized by the sanctions and measure and of the provisions on prevention.”

Concerning resocialization, the Member States of the Council of Europe should consider the Council's recommendation adopted in 2006, stating that “all detention shall be managed so as to facilitate the reintegration into free society of persons who have been deprived of their liberty” (Recommendation Rec(2006)2 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the European Prison Rules, Part I, Section 6).

¹ The three institutions were the Vác Strict and Medium Regime Prison, the Győr-Moson-Sopron County Remand Prison and the “Gyorskocsi Street” Remand Prison of Budapest.

The task of resocialization may be fulfilled by several methods, but it seems obvious that employment is just as an important part of it as the education and (vocational) training of the convicts (Borbély, 2006, pp. 93-98). There are numerous possibilities for the latter two; both formal (for example primary or secondary education) and informal trainings are available. At a lower level of the legal system – that of Hungarian legal norms – the Minister of Justice Decree (Decree 16/2014 (XII.19.) on the Detailed Rules of Confinement Replacing Prison Sentence, Confinement, Pretrial Detention and Disciplinary Fines) on re-integrational activities² states that:

“89. § (2) During the reintegration activity, efforts should be made to form and to develop the convict’s self-esteem and sense of responsibility, to facilitate the integration of the sentenced person into the labour market and social life.”

The informal activities may also be labelled “leisure-cultural activities”, and are considerably varied; autodidactic study groups, library usage, sports, competitions, etc. belong to this category. According to the literature (Miklósi, 2014), it is agreed that pursuing any meaningful occupation may help convicts uphold their connection with regular social activities, may keep them from stepping on the road to so-called “prison-socialization”, and may reduce the inactivity stemming from imprisonment and rigid daily routine (Lőrincz & Nagy, 1997 as cited in Miklósi, 2014).

In accordance with all the above-mentioned goals – in order to provide daytime activity and entertainment as well as opportunity for learning, gaining knowledge and development – prison radios have been, following the UK practice, introduced in some Hungarian prisons.

2. Prison radios in the UK

The beginning of prison radios’ history goes back to the mid-1990s, when the HM Feltham Prison for juvenile delinquents first broadcasted an experimental night-time programme for its inmates.³ The plan was to provide the convicts with a radio programme featuring their stories, their hopes and interests at a time when people are the most vulnerable: at night. However, ten more years had to pass before prison radios became a national success. In 2005, Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service and the BBC have signed an agreement on cooperation, officially launching prison radios; a year later, the Prison Radio Association (PRA⁴) was founded. In 2007, based on the Association’s work, a first 24/7 prison radio started to broadcast in the HM Brixton Prison. The co-hosts of the first show were a BBC anchor and an in-

² For differences between the terms ‘resocialization’ (used in Hungary before 2013) and ‘reintegration’ (used in Hungary after 2013) see: Katalán, 2015.

³ The choice of the location is not random: HM Feltham Prison has always held the first place in supporting the inmates. Other examples are the Bad Boys Bakery, where the convicts bake bread and other baker’s ware which are then sold all over London; the semi-public Clink Restaurant, where they are trained to be chefs; or Bounce Back, where emancipated convicts can learn the trade of house-painter.

⁴ See <https://www.prisonradioassociation.org/> and <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b041vcpz>.

mate, who – together with a guest star, the ex-Clash musician Mick Jones – also performed the well-known track *Should I Stay or Should I Go* (James, 2007).

When starting the programme, another Recommendation of the Council of Europe (Recommendation No. R (89) 12 of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers on Education in Prison, 1989) was repeatedly cited in the non-official preparatory documents. The Recommendation states that all inmates must be provided with creative and cultural activities (among other things) (Recommendation on Education, 1989, Section 2). This is further emphasized by the above mentioned Recommendation on Prison Rules of 2006: “Recreational opportunities, which include sport, games, cultural activities, hobbies and other leisure pursuits, shall be provided and, as far as possible, prisoners shall be allowed to organise them” (Recommendation on Prison Rules, 2006, Part 22, Section 27.6).

Since 2013, the prison radio programmes produced by the PRA have been broadcasted in more than a hundred institutions in the UK and Wales, and 99 % of inmates have heard about them. According to PRA surveys, 76 % of the convicts currently listen to the broadcast, and 37 % do so on a daily basis (Our Story, 2018). The PRA, with all its peculiarities stemming from the special (prison) circumstances, is a copybook example of what can be called the “third leg” of the three-fold media system:⁵ the alternative or community media that is built on the audience producing (their own) media content for the audience. The special characteristics specific to this kind of media are:

- Ensuring a possibility for partaking in society, and thereby strengthening intercultural dialogue;
- Demystifying mass media;
- Supporting marginalized social groups ignored or un-preferred by other types of media (“giving voice to the voiceless”);
- Ensuring added values (availability and openness);
- Giving special importance to being ‘local’, and;
- Creating an alternative public environment and alternative publicity (Gosztonyi, 2014, pp. 31–32).

Approximately a thousand of them took part in producing PRA programmes in the three prisons housing the studios,⁶ while non-prisoner employees of the PRA travelled all over the country and produced radio content in local prisons. In this way, prisoners have been able to address their fellow prisoners. The programmes – for obvious security reasons – are never broadcasted live: both radio experts of the BBC and employees of the Prison Services examine the materials in advance from different viewpoints.

PRA continuously provides the audience of prison radio programmes with guidance and counsel on the following topics:

⁵ The three-fold media system includes public service, commercial and community media service providers.

⁶ HM Feltham Prison, HM Coldingley Prison and HM Styal Prison.

- Housing;
- Education, training, and employment;
- Health;
- Alcohol and other substances abuse;
- Financial issues, benefits and debt management;
- Children and family;
- Demeanour, attitude and behaviour.

Besides all this, diverse campaigns are launched regularly. One of them is especially worth highlighting: the one broadcasted between March and August 2015 aiming at enhancement of general knowledge and consisting, among other things, in a daily book-club show “Books Unlocked”. During the campaign, the show sent more than 400 books to the audience in 79 different prisons, and 39 % of the beneficiaries indicated their intention of reading more in the future as a result of the campaign. Another programme series serving an important purpose is the Make-a-Song-Request. On the PRA’s website, friends and families can send song tracks to inmates, which further strengthens or at least preserves their connections with the outsideworld.

In their evaluation report of 2010, Katherine Wilkinson and Joanna Davidson, professors at Sheffield Hallam University, commend the fact that the PRA maintenance expenses are covered by private donations and subsidies secured by a cooperation agreement with the Ministry of Justice. At the same time, however, they consider questions concerning ownership of studio equipment to be potentially dangerous. As they note, “the successful installation of the NPRS satellite radio reception equipment across the prison estate is key to the PRA’s future development. The PRA has no control over this, as responsibility for the installations lies with NOMS,⁷ however this needs to be monitored carefully” (Wilkinson & Davidson, 2010, p. 3.). They also emphasized the possibility of expanding the “PRA-project” all over the world. Indeed, since 2010, Scotland, Sweden, Israel, Australia (Anderson & Bedford, 2017), Trinidad and Tobago have come up with similar initiatives (PRA International, 2018). And so has Hungary.

3. Prison Radio in Hungary

The first prison radio in Central Europe was launched in Hungary in 2014, with the slogan “You have the right to stay quiet and listen. To us.” The Vác Strict and Medium Regime Prison was the first in line. The warden was open-minded enough to let the first broadcasts called Bars FM go on air, stating that “Here we have all the possible difficulties, so if we can make it work here, it will work anywhere” (Munkácsy, 2017). Following the initial success, the instead of Give Voice the official name of the Association is Speak Out (‘Adj Hangot’) Association – the legal entity operating prison radios in Hungary – has started this communication novelty in the Győr-Ménfőcsanak Remand Prison (Sing Sing FM) and the “Gyorskocsi Street” Remand Prison of Budapest (Hessz FM).

⁷ National Offender Management Service.

Hungarian prison radios have been operating in similar fashion and working for similar goals as their UK counterparts. It is not a coincidence that for them – as opposed to many other Hungarian media providers – the BBC’s recommendations on programme production provided a standard to be followed. The goals are defined along the lines of:

- Transferring information;
- Relieving tension between inmates;
- Making the time spent in prison useful;
- Preparing for life after release, reintegration, and;
- Relapse-prevention (see Radio B, 2018).⁸

In all the three institutions, guards, taking factors like good behaviour or reliability into account, recommend prospective radio staff members to external advisors. It is a Hungarian peculiarity that those convicted of the most heinous of crimes (paedophile sex offenders) or those who took part in criminal cases with wide media coverage cannot get a place among the staff-members. The external advisors provide a few-months-long training to the few chosen convicts and train them in theoretical basics of programme production as well as in its technical background. During the training, the convicts keep up with the other inmates – their future sources of information or potential interviewees. The following topics are covered during the training:

- Getting to know the basic radio genres, as well as;
- Tasks and roles connected to broadcasting;
- Compiling possible topics within the prison and working out a framework for their presentation;
- Informing the prison community about these ideas and collecting feedback;
- In this sense, involving the inmates and preparing their reception of the radio;
- Learning cooperation;
- Getting to know broadcasting technology;
- Developing basic computer and sound editing skills, and;
- Practicing interviewing techniques (Radio B, 2018).

With these tools, the prisoners are ready to produce their programmes (Farkas, Horváth, Jellinek, Munka & Pándi, 2016), through which prison radios can amplify the “voice” of all other programmes aiming at resocialization, as the inmates gain information directly from their peers, i.e. people they know and trust. The programmes can never support violence, law-breaking, or any kind of (ethnic, religious, sexual or other) discrimination. Because of the particular context, special attention must be paid to avoiding defamation or slander. The radio staff – the inmates – can work as a kind of ‘experts by experience’ (Gosztonyi, 2013); as role models for their

⁸ See <http://www.adjhangot.org/a-bortonradiorol/#79503d5c-83f7-5>.

fellow inmates, offering behavioural patterns worth following; they can help to break the routine of being locked up. During the production of the content, it is a reality that – as Judit Hajdú (2014) stated, referring to the number of the whole prison population of Hungary – “only the fantasy of 18,000 people can set limits to the possibilities!”

4. Afterword

The programmes of prison radios will never be heard by general publics. They can be ingenious, or they can be horrible. While we are free – and because we are free – we’ll never be able to enjoy these close circuit broadcasts. But the public is not the target audience here anyway. The target audience is at the same place where those producing the programmes are: behind the bars. The show made by them is for them. The effect and significance thereof was best expressed by ex-convict Noal Smith in *The Independent*: “When you’re stuck in a room that size for 23 hours a day with no access to the outside world except the radio, NPR becomes a good friend.” (Gander, 2016)

All things considered, prison radios can become a win-win project: good for content producers, good for audiences, good for interviewees and, all in all, beneficial to the whole prison population. Cultural and creative activities such as prison radio programmes are essential for inmates’ development, their self-expression and interaction with other human beings, and thus are invaluable for the prisoners’ re-entry to the society of free. The significance of prison radios can be further observed via released convicts: in the case of the “Gyorskocsi Street” Remand Prison of Budapest, “there are no recidivists among the circa 30 ex-inmates who had worked as members of the radio staff.” (One year ago, 2017) Obviously, we cannot say that this is exclusively thanks to prison radios; in order to draw well-founded conclusions, we would need a thorough follow-up study in the future. Not only for this reason, the decision from 2017, stating that all prison radios cease to operate in Hungary, should be re-considered.

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