

The Interplay Between Rehabilitation and Media Communication: A Case Study on San Quentin News

Xinxiang Liu^{1,a,*}

¹*University of Gloucestershire, The Park, Cheltenham, GL50 2RH, UK
a. lxx6207080@gmail.com*

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This research paper delves into the intricate interplay between media communication and personal rehabilitation, with a particular focus on the unique case study of the San Quentin News, which is a media organization established and operated by incarcerated individuals within San Quentin State Prison. The overarching objective of this study is to elucidate the positive roles played by media communication in fostering personal recovery in both spiritual and social dimensions, while also assessing the transformative influence of media communication. To undertake this research, a methodological approach rooted in quantitative research has been employed. The study independently crafted a questionnaire, which was subsequently disseminated within the precincts of San Quentin prison. This questionnaire was administered to individuals who had previously been engaged in contributing to the San Quentin News. In pursuit of investigating the impact of media on individual recovery, this academic study concludes that media plays a predominantly positive role in the recovery process across various psychological and societal dimensions. This assertion finds support in the case study presented within this paper, highlighting the substantial restorative potential of media, especially within the context of the correctional system.

Keywords: media, rehabilitation, incarceration, prisoner, San Quentin News

1. Introduction

San Quentin News, established in 1940 within California's San Quentin State Prison, is a remarkable media outlet run entirely by incarcerated individuals. This publication provides incarcerated journalists and contributors a platform to voice their perspectives and engage with a wide array of subjects, including prison life, criminal justice reform, personal narratives, and more. Beyond its journalistic role, San Quentin News plays a pivotal role in rehabilitation and education by offering practical training in journalism and related skills. It has gained recognition for its unique contribution to prison journalism and exemplifies how media can serve as a powerful tool for personal growth, self-expression, and advocacy within the correctional system. With a readership inside and outside the prison walls, San Quentin News fosters a better understanding of incarceration issues and actively participates in criminal justice reform efforts.

The distinctive nature of San Quentin News prompts a meticulous examination of its profound influence on incarcerated individuals. Evidently, a multitude of inmates who have engaged with San Quentin News have undergone substantial spiritual recovery, experiencing a profound reconnection

with their own sense of existence and a profound recognition of their intrinsic self-worth. This aspect of personal recovery is intrinsically tied to the media's capacity to instill a renewed sense of purpose and self-identity. Simultaneously, San Quentin News has also been instrumental in fostering social recovery among incarcerated individuals, providing them with unique opportunities for reputation rebuilding and gaining essential employment prospects. In this regard, "the Last Mile" Project emerges as a compelling example, wherein the media serves as a conduit for imparting critical skills that bolster the prisoners' chances of meaningful reintegration into the workforce upon release. Crucially, the transformative processes are underpinned by the pervasive influence of media and communication theory, a facet that warrants rigorous academic exploration. The convergence of media, personal recovery, and rehabilitation is the focal point of this scholarly endeavor. In the realm of academia, there is a notable scarcity of research, particularly within the context of correctional systems, addressing the intersection of media and individual recovery.

This paper primarily employs a research method centered around questionnaires. The intention was to scrutinize whether involvement with this media outlet yielded a positive impact, encompassing aspects of mental recovery and social rehabilitation. This methodology was instrumental in aligning with and substantiating the core argument presented in this article. The research herein not only contributes to the scholarly discourse on media effects but also advances the understanding of the critical role media communication plays in facilitating personal recovery and social reintegration. By elucidating the synergy between media, exemplified by the San Quentin News, and the contemporary Internet landscape, this paper offers a holistic perspective on the transformative power of media in the journey towards individual healing and societal reintegration. This pursuit not only enhances societal comprehension of marginalized populations and the intricacies of the correctional system but also advances the discourse on judicial equity, thus aiming to address critical gaps in academic scholarship pertaining to prison environment.

2. Background

2.1. Spiritual recovery and media communication

Imprisonment inevitably relegates individuals, irrespective of their age or the magnitude of their transgressions, to the margins of society. This drastic shift in status, from ordinary citizens to marginalized individuals, frequently instills feelings of shame and engenders cognitive dissonance regarding self-perception among most prisoners. In alignment with Michel Foucault's insights on the evolution of punitive ideology, there is a shift in penal practice from inflicting corporeal pain to targeting the psyche [1]. Concomitant with the distress and remorse triggered by their offenses, incarcerated individuals often grapple with guilt, introspection, depression, anxiety, and a profound identity crisis.

San Quentin News adopts a unique staffing model and operational approach, affording incarcerated individuals the opportunity to engage in meaningful employment within the prison walls. This media outlet and the ensuing avenues for communication facilitate a partial alleviation of identity-related obstacles. Beyond its regular sections, including legal stories, death row stories, profile stories, education, sports, editorials, art, letters/poems, the platform empowers participating inmates to share their narratives, articulate their viewpoints, and nurture their interests. This restoration of purpose and the sense of accomplishment associated with composing and publishing their own news is pivotal on a spiritual level. Participation or witnessing fellow inmates' involvement in this endeavor engenders relief from certain dimensions of depression and anxiety, all attributable to the presence of media communication.

Moreover, the profound challenge of self-identity, as expounded upon by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, is a focal point of consideration [1]. Foucault's

philosophical examination dissects the ideological underpinnings of the prison institution and the evolution of the disciplinary apparatus. He points out that prisoners are cast as villains, monsters, perhaps even madmen, and, over time, as 'abnormal' individuals [1]. Globally, society imposes identities upon prisoners, and the labels that emerge tend to be resoundingly negative: inferior, morally tainted, and essentially devoid of redeeming qualities. Society's stigma and desire for the exclusion of these individuals align with Foucault's characterization of prisoners as "social traitors" [1]. The issue is compounded when the characterization of prisoners is primarily shaped by individuals in society who have limited exposure to real prison experiences and primarily rely on portrayals of violent inmates depicted in television shows and movies. The quandary lies in the stark discrepancy between these labels and the lived realities of incarcerated individuals. Society's perception reduces these individuals to their crimes, obscuring their individuality. It then becomes hard to hear when society labels the individual as their crime instead of as a person. Given the negative connotation of being an inmate, these individuals are stripped of their agency through the loss of their "deviant" voices, which are seen as unworthy of attention [2].

As one of the rare media outlets in the world, San Quentin News endeavors to disrupt this status quo through the potent medium of communication. Prison guards and staff, as agents of social control, occupy a reflexive role in the structure of the prison [3]. Their dedicated efforts primarily contribute to fostering positive transformations within the incarcerated population. Consequently, San Quentin News endeavors to disrupt the prevailing status quo through the influential medium of media communication, with the aim of accentuating the constructive work undertaken by these personnel. It aims to amplify the voices of prisoners, bridging the chasm of understanding between them and the wider world, thus establishing a more vivid and authentic comprehension of incarcerated individuals. This initiative prepares a receptive environment for the prisoners' process of self-identity reconstruction upon their eventual reintegration into society. These efforts provide inmates with tangible support and renewed hope, facilitating a journey toward self-identification and the reclamation of self-worth within this transformative framework.

2.2. Social rehabilitation and media communication

The moment an individual enters the prison system, their capacity to receive a fair and accurate assessment of their character and reputation becomes severely compromised. The shadow of incarceration shrouds all other aspects of their identity, reinforcing a dehumanizing perception that equates prisoners with beings requiring restraint, devoid of the need for freedom [2]. Imprisoned individuals lose not only their physical liberty but also their voice and right to self-expression. This dichotomy, on the one hand, underscores the necessity of the criminal justice system in addressing illegal activities, while on the other, it confronts the reality that the vast majority of prisoners aspire to reintegrate into society. This internalization of the carceral logic perpetuates the dehumanization of incarcerated individuals. Efforts should be made to confront the repercussions of incarceration, which not only encompass the dehumanization of those in custody but also the internalization of the carceral mindset [4]. In response to these challenges, the media has played a pivotal role in partially restoring the agency of prisoners. Leveraging the influence of media communication, it has provided a platform for their voices to be heard. This endeavor is instrumental in ameliorating the prevailing circumstances and dismantling the internalization of carceral ideologies.

In terms of social reputation, within the prison environment, incarcerated individuals often face feelings of revulsion, rejection, and disillusionment from their own families. This isolation, particularly pronounced among young offenders, exacerbates their struggle for familial support. San Quentin News has thoughtfully introduced an audio blog, offering prisoners a means to connect with their families through interviews and emotional expressions, even dedicating a column specifically to youth offenders, which gives them a chance to get back to their families and be of service to their

communities [5]. This initiative significantly contributes to restoring prisoners' standing within their families, aided substantially by the influence of media.

Regarding social identity, the media's positive influence on recovery is undeniable. Through its coverage of prisoner and victim treatment, computer and educational programs, and degrees offered by Mount Tamalpais College, it effectively conveys to the external world that prisoners are actively engaged in self-improvement. San Quentin News, as a media outlet, has garnered support from prominent figures, including Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and appellate court judge J. Anthony Kline. Such endorsements from celebrities, representing a form of media communication, contribute to the restoration of social status [6].

2.3. Media influence

In today's digital age, the Internet undeniably emerges as the most versatile and efficient communication medium. Individuals access information on the Internet and subsequently form judgments regarding subjective intentions, drawing from the foundation of objective data. When individuals encounter an article from San Quentin News, their cognitive schemas are immediately set into motion, guiding them in making inferences and judgments about the new information. This, in turn, significantly influences their reactions and attitudes. Whether these schemas are of a personal or role-based nature, there is a prevalent tendency towards providing negative feedback, often accompanied by labels portraying prisoners as innately malevolent, morally deficient, and deserving of societal isolation.

Schema theory posits an active and selective process of schema formation which in some sense constructs reality as much as it embodies it [7]. Unfortunately, this constructed "reality" frequently leans towards injustice. San Quentin News adopts a multifaceted approach, including first-person substitution, authentic emotional expression, and achieves emotional projection through universally relatable intimate relationships, all with the aim of presenting incarcerated individuals in a universally relatable light. Aligned with the concept of "The medium is the message," the true worth of this medium transcends the mere content of San Quentin News articles [8]. Its real significance lies in its dedicated mission to facilitate the personal recovery of prisoners.

Within the context of online reading, individuals partake in a heightened form of self-interaction, gaining a unique vantage point to witness the real-life experiences of incarceration and listen to the authentic voices of prison inmates. This innovative medium, characterized by its distinctive format and content, fosters active and creative engagement. It serves as a catalyst for a transformative journey where the original self evolves into a new will and behavioral subject [9]. In this context, the cognitive transformation of individual prisoners, and even the broader prison system, is palpable. Consequently, media delivered through the Internet plays an indispensable role in advancing the personal recovery of incarcerated individuals. It underscores the transformative potential of media, particularly in the digital age, as an agent of change in the rehabilitation of prisoners. It challenges prevailing stigmas and fosters understanding through a dynamic process of information exchange and cognitive evolution, aligning with the scholarly discourse in the field.

3. Questionnaire

3.1. Method and data

In addition to a thorough review of existing literature on incarceration and communication, this research incorporates a questionnaire survey method to gather empirical data from individuals who have had direct involvement with San Quentin News. Specifically, the survey was administered to both current employees and former employees of San Quentin News, all of whom are individuals serving their sentences within the prison system.

The questionnaire for the article was divided into 3 main sections: one for the collection of personal information, including age, employment at San Quentin News and previous occupation. The second for the opportunities that the respondents felt San Quentin News offered them. And the third for the collection of the respondents' reasons for joining San Quentin News.

Apart from collecting basic personal details and monitoring career transitions, the primary focus of the questionnaire was to be able to gain insight into the transitions and opportunities enabled by San Quentin News from the subjective perspective of the respondents. However, given the unique context of the prison location, it is important to recognize the limitations associated with the mass distribution of a questionnaire in a highly regulated environment. San Quentin News has a total of 12 current and 23 former employees, some of whom have been released and can no longer be reached. Therefore, the actual number of respondents to the questionnaire was quite limited. A total of 30 questionnaires were distributed for this study, and after screening, only 15 valid responses were received.

3.2. Results

The collected data were analyzed using Excel tables and SPSS software, with results presented through bar charts and pie charts. The key findings include:

- The age of respondents spans from 30 to 69 years old, with diverse positions held at San Quentin News.
- Previous career fields encompassed a wide range of industries, but an overwhelming 87% of respondents expressed aspirations for future careers in journalism or the judicial sector, indicating a positive shift in career goals.

3.2.1. Question 1

Regarding changes experienced through their work at San Quentin News, respondents conveyed their experiences using keywords. The most frequently mentioned keywords included:

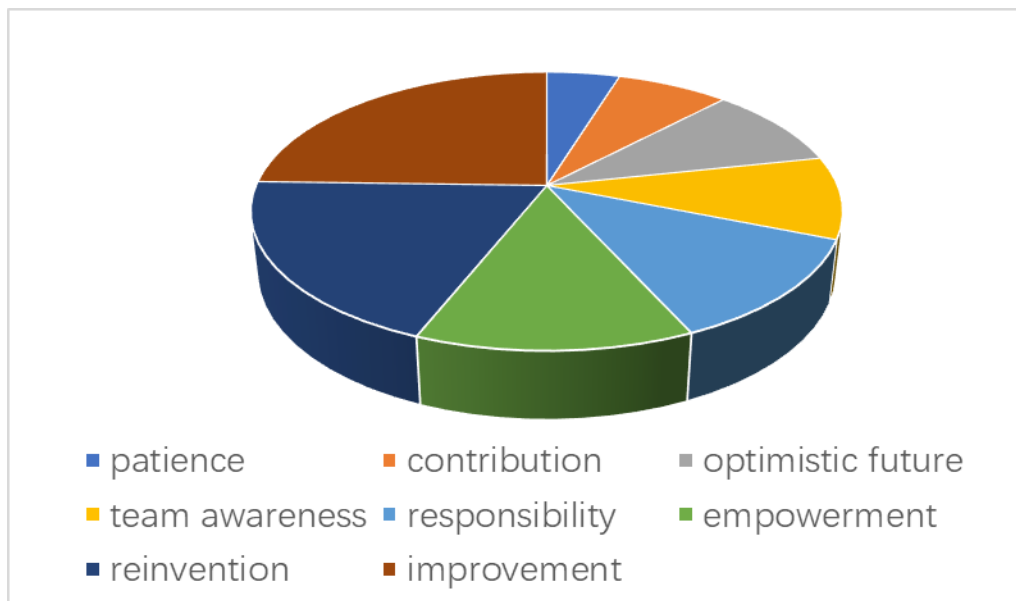


Figure 1: The result of question 1 in the Questionnaire

Three most frequently mentioned words is: Improvement, Empowerment, and Responsibility. The results undeniably demonstrate that San Quentin News, as a news media outlet, has had an

unequivocally positive impact on the respondents. Remarkably, no negative changes were reported in the responses. Additionally, a closer examination of the keyword statistics unmistakably affirms the media's profound and enduring positive effects on every facet of personal recovery.

3.2.2. Question 2

Regarding the opportunities offered by San Quentin News, respondents cited the following:

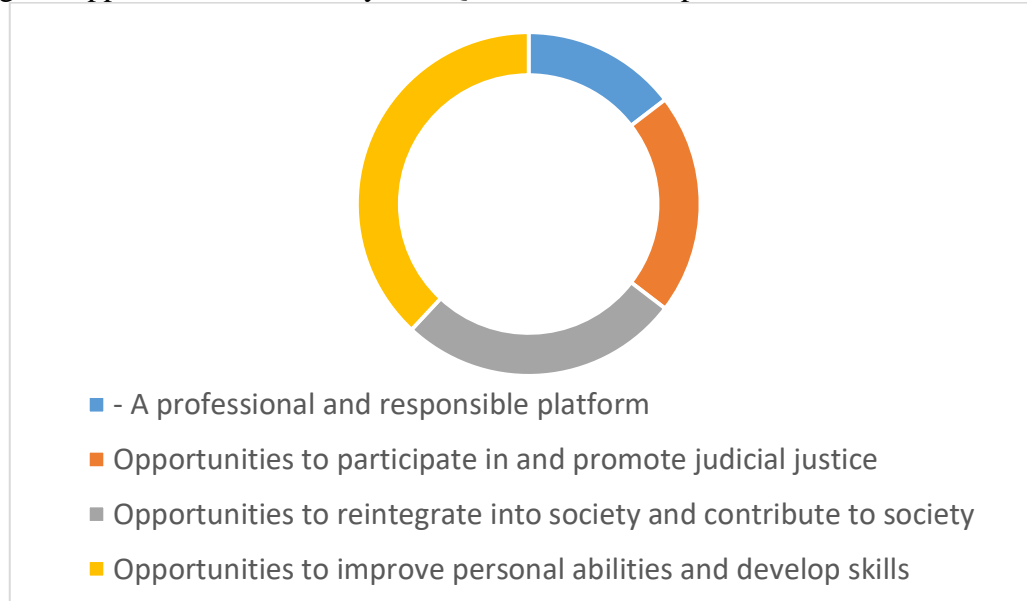


Figure 2: The result of question 1 in the Questionnaire

The personal recovery achieved by the interviewees through the opportunities provided is abundantly evident. Whether it pertains to spiritual self-identity, successful reintegration into society, or the reestablishment of social status, these transformations hold substantial significance.

Of noteworthy mention is that 80% of respondents emphasized the restoration of hope for the future when discussing the opportunities afforded to them. The term "hope" featured prominently in nearly every response, once again underscoring the pivotal role of media in facilitating individuals' spiritual recovery and self-acceptance. This underscores the indispensable positive impact of media in this context.

3.2.3. Question 3

The interviewees displayed a notable lack of uniformity in their reasons for joining San Quentin News. Their rationales were, to a large extent, unique and individualistic. However, a common thread among the majority of respondents was the sense of confusion they experienced during their time in prison. Many regarded the employment opportunities offered by San Quentin News as a beacon of hope and a guiding light amidst the challenges they faced. Consequently, they made the decision to become part of San Quentin News.

3.3. Summarize

In accordance with the research objectives and the insights gleaned from the questionnaire survey, it is incontrovertible that media communication, exemplified by San Quentin News, exerts a significant and positive influence on fostering personal recovery among individuals. This conclusion harmonizes seamlessly with the overarching theme of this study, and it is in accordance with my initial predictions

and assumptions, serving as a testament to the substantial impact of media on the personal recovery journeys of prisoners.

The analysis of keywords employed by respondents to describe the changes resulting from their work at San Quentin News, including "Improvement," "Empowerment," and "Responsibility," unequivocally underscores the overwhelmingly constructive nature of these metamorphoses. Significantly, no negative changes were reported, underscoring the media's unequivocally positive influence on personal recovery.

Moreover, the opportunities presented by San Quentin News, as elucidated by the respondents, encompass professional advancement, involvement in judicial justice, societal reintegration, and personal skill cultivation. These opportunities, highlighted by keywords such as "hope," play an instrumental role in facilitating spiritual recovery, successful reintegration into society, and the restoration of self-identity.

Overall, this research offers a nuanced and authentic perspective on the individual journeys of incarcerated individuals within the realm of media. It underscores the pivotal role of media communication in advancing personal recovery, aligning seamlessly with the study's original objectives and substantiating its central theme. These findings not only bolster the research direction but also enrich the comprehension of the intricate interplay between media, personal recovery, and the lives of prisoners.

4. Conclusion

The positive impact of the San Quentin News as a news medium on incarcerated individuals is clear, as is the personal healing that incarcerated individuals achieve through the opportunities provided by the San Quentin News. Thus, the study also demonstrates the power of the media in personal healing and social reintegration, which helps the government and society to think through and address questions about marginalized populations and the complexity of the correctional system. However, this paper suffers from too little data to analyze and too few references due to the niche nature of the topic, as well as the issue of popularity. As research on this topic deepens, and based on the increase in scholarship related to the prison environment, it is possible to follow up with further research in this area.

References

- [1] Foucault, M. (2023). *Discipline and punish*. In *Social Theory Re-Wired* (pp. 291-299). Routledge.
- [2] Stepanov, A. (2017). *The Rhetoric of Inmates: Identification Processes in the San Quentin News*.
- [3] Owen, B. A. (1988). *The reproduction of social control: A study of prison workers at San Quentin*. New York: praeger.
- [4] Hazou, R., & Daniels, R. (2022). *Unshackling the Body, Mind, and Spirit: Reflections on Liberation and Creative Exchange between San Quentin and Auckland Prisons*. *Humanities*, 11(1), 7.
- [5] Raul, H. (2023). *KEEPING HOPE ALIVE FOR YOUTH OFFENDERS*, *San Quentin News*
- [6] Erdogan, B. Z. (1999). *Celebrity endorsement: A literature review*. *Journal of marketing management*, 15(4), 291-314.
- [7] Arbib, M. A. (1992). *Schema theory*. *The encyclopedia of artificial intelligence*, 2, 1427-1443.).
- [8] McLuhan, M. (2012). *The medium is the message*. *Media and cultural studies: keywords*, 100-07.
- [9] Carter, M. J., & Fuller, C. (2015). *Symbolic interactionism*. *Sociopedia. isa*, 1(1), 1-17.