

The TOUGHEST Beat

The slow, quiet demise of prison newspapers

In 1979 the inmate editors of the *Angolite*, the newsmagazine of Louisiana's notoriously violent Angola penitentiary, pushed their journalistic freedom to a new limit. In an exhaustively researched 27-page essay titled "Prison: The Sexual Jungle," Wilbert Rideau chronicled the systemic sexual violence typical of most prisons. Characterizing brutal behavior in analytical language, the story identified the structural divide between a prison's "men" (the dominant inmates, or "studs") and its "women" (the weaker males who become "wives" or "whores" of stronger inmates). The latter group, Rideau wrote matter-of-factly, "are 'property' and, as such, are gambled for, sold, traded, and auctioned off like common cattle."

"The Sexual Jungle" earned Rideau and his co-editor, Billy Sinclair, a 1980 George Polk Award, making them the first prison journalists to join the ranks of Polk winners such as Ed Bradley, Seymour Hersh, Walter Cronkite, and I.F. Stone. The piece was also a finalist in that year's National Magazine Awards.

Like much of what appeared in prison newspapers at the time, "The Sexual Jungle" was intended for an outside audience as much as for its incarcerated readers. In his book *Jailhouse Journalism: The Fourth Estate Behind Bars* (Transaction, 2002), James McGrath Morris notes that this line to the outside, this perceived opportunity to offer an accurate portrayal of prison life and of the inmates themselves, "was always an enduring notion among prison journalists." And some had significant outside audiences: In the 1950s the *Menard Time* (Illinois) climbed to an international circulation of 7,500; in the early

1960s the Fort Madison, Iowa, *Presidio* magazine reached 3,500 unincarcerated subscribers; and in the late 1970s the *Angolite* boasted 1,700.

It's striking that free people were once this interested in the prison press. In part, this is probably because prison reform used to be a more fashionable social and political issue. Prison publications were the primary avenue by which incarcerated voices reached the outside, and people often sympathized with inmates' concerns at a personal level. When a 1949 *Presidio* profile of Ole Lindquist, a lonely lifer at the Fort Madison prison, made its way into the mainstream media, hundreds of people from across the country responded by sending him Christmas gifts and letters. His newfound supporters also appealed to the governor, and Lindquist was released on parole less than three years later. Similarly, a 1988 *Angolite* article about long-term inmates built momentum toward the release of at least four men who had been serving unreasonable terms.

For incarcerated readers, prison publications have been a source of information about changing penal policies, relevant legal reforms, and conditions at other facilities. The May 2000 issue of the *Texas Echo*, which is distributed to all inmates in the state, led with a gutsy story, "Analysis of a Lockdown." More than 100,000 inmates had been confined to their cells for 11 days with little explanation, and the piece's author, Jorge Antonio Renaud, described the shakedowns, sparse meals, and intense boredom. Assessing the vio-

lent scuffles and escape attempts that led to the lockdown, he concluded that the guards were to blame. Not surprisingly, the issue was suppressed in some of the state's prisons, and officials insisted on running a rebuttal in the next issue—but the



Inmate journalists at the Stillwater, Minnesota, Prison Mirror

story forced prison administrators to respond and to provide an explanation for the crackdown.

As prison publications quietly disappear, inmates' fraying ties with penal officials, other inmates, the media, and the outside world will dissolve too. Explosive growth in the number of people who are incarcerated has shaped a vast potential readership; more than 2.25 million people were locked up as of June 2006 (see "America Incarcerated," p. 54). But publications that cater to this growing audience are increasingly difficult to find. Paul Wright, editor of the venerable prisoners' rights magazine *Prison Legal News*, guesses that fewer than 30 official prison newspapers are still publishing (down from 250 in 1959). The *Angolite*, the *Texas Echo*, and the Stillwater, Minnesota, *Prison Mirror* are among the best known of the survivors; the once-popular *Presidio*,

COURTESY OF THE PRISON MIRROR

Menard Time, and hundreds of others have been shut down.

What's left of the prison press suffers from heavy censorship. "The sorry state of prison publications," Wright says, "is that basically, they exist almost as the warden's public relations link." Even the *Angolite*, once held up as a bastion of uncensored prison journalism, has been tamed: *Prison Legal News* has "a lot more stories about the corruption at Angola than they do—because they don't have any," Wright says.

Some degree of censorship has always afflicted prison publications; the warden or some other official always has the last word. "There are no First Amendment rights in prison," says Jim Danky, recently retired periodicals librarian at the Wisconsin Historical Society, which is home to the country's largest collection of prison newspapers. He compares them to high school publications, which also must be approved by an administrator. The decline of the prison press, Danky says, is akin to a form of psychological torture: "Prison journalism can be seen as a way of coddling prisoners," he says, and where officials used to believe that newspapers kept inmates busier—and, hence, more likely to stay out of trouble—today's administrators want to "maximize the boredom" and maintain stricter control of prisoners' perks.

Despite the fact that writing has long been viewed as a rehabilitative and educational exercise for the incarcerated, fewer institutions now provide a forum for it. "They want a cowed, silent, and ignorant prison population—it's easier to manage," Wright says. Censoring and shutting down these publications is part of what he's observed as "a massive clampdown of everything to do with reading, communicating, and writing."

And he should know. Wright began publishing *Prison Legal News* in 1990 from his cell in Clallam Bay Corrections Center in Washington state. It

was never an official prison publication—Wright and his fellow editors sent their work to friends on the outside, who laid it out and published it—but officials tried to clamp down on it by bouncing Wright around to different facilities, keeping source material out of his hands, and banning bulk mail, gift subscriptions, and the magazine itself. He was released in 2003 and continues to publish the cleanly designed newsprint magazine every month, reporting on health care, drug use, violence, mental illness, inmate labor, and all manner of other human rights issues.

Most official publications wouldn't get these articles past the warden; but, to be fair, that's not always what they're aiming for. The *Stillwater Prison Mirror*, the country's longest-running continuously published prison newspaper, tends to focus on noncontroversial topics such as community outreach programs, workshops, and graduation ceremonies. It's not going out on a "Sexual Jungle" limb anytime soon, but it does run editorials and informative pieces on prisoners' savings, health services, mental illness, the prison's hospice program, and many other subjects.

"Ultimately, it's for the offenders," says Pat Pawlak, *Stillwater's* education director and the *Prison Mirror's* staff supervisor. "It's to highlight opportunities and successes and people doing positive things with their time." The crisp-looking *Prison Mirror*, which resembles a newsletter more than a newspaper, is distributed to *Stillwater's* 1,400 inmates every month; copies are also sent to more than 200 outside subscribers. It may be nonconfrontational, but consider that the vast majority of the nearly 5,000 prisons and jails in this country don't have a newspaper to serve them. It's a deficiency that, considering overcrowding, tight budgets, and lackluster medical care, isn't likely to become a high priority. "Everything is really bad," Wright says, "and the prison press just got swept away with everything else." ☐

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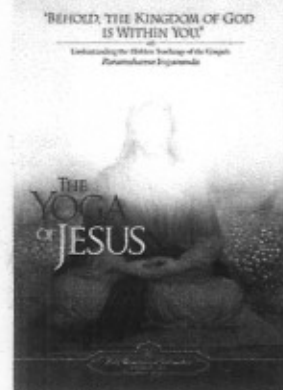
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