OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND: A CONTENT ANALYSIS ON MEDIA FRAMING OF INCARCERATION

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ABSTRACT
This thesis uses a content analysis in order to answer the question of how incarceration is framed by popular reality and fictional dramas focused on prisons. Employing a coding system to analyze the episodes of two popular television shows about incarceration, this study is concerned with how and what content is being presented to the audience and how it is framed. Using *Oz* and *Lock-up* as text, the study used Entman’s (1993) four processes of framing communication. It was determined that the information and themes of incarceration in the television programs were unrealistic representations of prisoners, rehabilitation programs within the prisons, and reasons for incarceration. The study determined an inaccurate frame of the prison demographic is presented to audiences regarding incarceration. Although this study represents a limited amount of text, the results leave open the possibility of furthering the research and applying the content to a larger-scale study, including the impact of the frames on prison programs and sentencing.
# Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

- Importance of the Study
- Statement of the Problem
- Key Terms
- Organization of Remaining Chapters

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- Theoretical Basis
- The Literature
- Philosophical Basis
- Rationale
- Research Question

CHAPTER 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

- Scope
- Methodology
- Data Collection
- Data Analysis
- Ethical Considerations

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS OF THE STUDY

- Introduction to the Results
- Results of the Study
- Discussion

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

- Limitations of the Study
- Further Study or Recommendations
- Conclusion
Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

“Prisons are for punishment. Prisons exist to protect the public. But given that so many of their inhabitants eventually get out of them, they should be a place for second chances, too” (Stone, 2015). In 2007, the members of Prison Communication, Activism, Research, and Education (PCARE) estimated that 97% of the individuals incarcerated would be released within the next twenty years (p. 410).

The public reception of shorter prison sentences and more rehabilitation is favorable for those offenders able to be rehabilitated (“Public Opinion”, 2011), but despite this information, more money is spent on incarceration than education, leaving us to wonder if media portrayals have influenced public perception enough to justify the lack of education given to incarcerated individuals, the highest population of low-literate individuals (“The Crisis”, 2014).

America has become the leader in incarceration, and incarceration has become the most implemented governmental program in America (Hartnett, Novek & Wood, 2013). Twenty percent of U.S. prisoners are illiterate, with another 20% being functionally illiterate, meaning the individual can read at a fourth-grade level, but cannot understand complicated text (Hartnett, et al., 2013). Having become an “incarceration nation” (PCARE, 2007), where about two-thirds of released offenders succumb to recidivism resulting in re-incarceration (Cooper, Durose, Snyder, 2014), education surfaces as a credible solution to a rising problem; however, the saturation of images of crime and sensationalizing of criminality which have become part of American’s daily lives through media, entertainment, and political assumptions leave actual prisoners and prisons
virtually invisible. The “mass-mediated hallucinations lead to distortions in the public opinion and public policy” (PCARE, 2007, p. 408), so instead of using education to reduce recidivism, opponents of prison education argue it is a “waste of valuable resources and is unfair to law-abiding citizens who have to spend their hard-earned money to send their children to school” (p. 411).

**Importance of the Study**

Because of the amount of time and resources spent on incarceration, it is imperative to develop media literacy in regards to what media sources say about incarceration versus what the reality of incarceration is. With the public receiving important information about incarceration through entertainment medium, it becomes more important to understand what the audience is being told.

By understanding how and what framing is occurring, an audience can gain better media literacy. This literacy can benefit not only the rehabilitation programs and the inmates, but also the community.

**Statement of the Problem**

While it is not a surprise that entertainment television sensationalizes incarceration in the same way they do love, friendship, or war, the issue becomes the audiences’ lack of foundation or basis on the issue, which makes discerning reality and fiction troublesome. The American public is obsessed with crime and prison television, but largely has no basis to determine how sensationalized it is because the mainstream public doesn’t have access to incarceration in the same way as things like love, friendship, or war.
The audiences’ perception of incarceration influences voting and politicians’ stances on punishment, which in turn affect rehabilitation and education within the prison and upon release.

**Key Terms**

In order to clearly understand the study, frequently used terms must be defined: *media framing, media literacy, rehabilitation, and incarceration.*

*Media framing* refers to the way in which the media represents prisons and prisoners (Hartnett et al, 2013). This framing is what is presented to an audience to define what incarceration is. The term *frame* is meant as a category in which the media presents the definition. Framing selects a particular aspect of a story and makes it more salient in communication text in order to make promote a particular problem definition (Entman, 1999).

*Media literacy* is the audiences’ ability to analyze, evaluate, and determine the messages created by the media (Entman, 1999). For the purpose of this study media literacy deals with the audiences’ understanding of media represented incarceration and real-life incarceration.

*Rehabilitation*, for the purpose of this study, is any educational program, rehabilitative program, or technical program aimed at acclimating prisoners into the community upon release. *Incarceration* refers to prison and prisoners as a system.

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**

Chapter 2 discusses the literature surrounding incarceration and media framing. It provides a foundation for the study as well as the philosophical basis of incarceration. It
draws to light the importance and relevance of the research question and the rationale of the study. Chapter 3 examines the scope, methodology, and analysis of the study, while Chapter 4 shares the results of the study and discusses the implications. The study concludes with the limitation of the study as well as further recommendations for the study.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Theoretical Basis

Because public opinion favors shorter prison sentences and rehabilitation for prisoners able to be rehabilitated ("Public Opinion," 2011), it becomes necessary to understand what shapes the public perception in a way that allows America to be the leader in incarceration with a system in which 40% of those within it are functionally illiterate (Hartnett, Novek, & Wood, 2013).

As the content with which Americans receive a portrayal of prisons and prisoners is analyzed, an initial observation of the media framework can be developed.

While the agenda-setting theory has provided the insight to the “role of news media in identifying the key issues and topics of the day and their ability to influence the salience of these issues and topics on the public agenda” (McComb, 2014, p. 1), the idea of agenda-setting has developed a construct that explores the extent to which emphasis and details are placed on the subjects, as well as how they influence our thoughts and feelings about them; this is the theory of media framing.

Reese, Gandy, and Grant (2001) explained “framing refers to the way events and issues are organized and made sense of, especially by media, media professionals, and their audiences” (p.1), but unlike agenda-setting, framing reveals what is most interesting about the issue: the way it is defined. Entman (1993) offered a more in depth explanation of framing, stating:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a
Like Entman (1993), Scheufele (1999) asserted the difference between agenda-setting and framing is framing refers to the selection and salience of a particular aspect of an issue and how the audience is told to interpret the information, rather than agenda-setting, which refers to the overall issue and tells the audience it is an important issue.

On a basic level, framing works through selection and salience. Increasing the salience of a topic raises the likelihood of the recipients noticing the information, discerning meaning, and processing it (Entman, 1993). This isn’t something specific to the field of communication either, and framing is used across different fields of study, to include a socio-psychological field which demonstrates the way a social issue is framed creates a difference in how one respond (Reese et. al, 2001). This is an important aspect of framing when looking through the lens in which prisons are portrayed.

Within the context of news media framing, a thematic structure can contain a hypothesis-testing feature. This occurs when a story contains a specific theme, presented or implied, and the evidence given supports the hypothesis in such a way by the journalists’ observations or actions, and even through the use of source quotations (Pan & Kosiscki, 1993). These actions do not have to be bold or obvious statements, and often times casual statements in the form of “if…then… and not…unless” (p. 61) can implicitly present actions in the content of the story. So while the agenda-setting theory is a basis, a greater emphasis should be placed on how the issue is framed within the social context it is delivered.
When exploring the social context, Entman (1993) stated that within the field of communication, frames have at least four process locations: the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture. He explained the communicator’s contribution to the frame is to conscientiously or unconscientiously frame the judgment by deciding what to say; the text is what actually contains the framing/message through “keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments” (p. 52). The next portion of the framing effect takes place with the receiver, whose thinking and conclusion may, or may not, reflect the frame’s text and intention, and finally the culture, which is already “the stock of commonly invoked frames” (p. 53). Further, culture, according to Entman (1993), is a set of its own frames exhibited through the discourse and thinking of specific social grouping.

The Literature

Prison Framing. Culture is an important aspect to consider when dealing with media framing of the prison system and the prisoners. A culture of fear has been created and one has only to turn on a television and the images presented representing the penal system and its offenders will be inundated with extreme violence. Donzinger (1996) argued for a direct connection with those images and the rise in incarceration because the media is producing a representation of an environment full of crazed and hyper-violent criminals. As a culture, we are both afraid and captivated by these images of crime and punishment.

Hartnett et al. (2013) stated that the most captivating of these media spectacles is found “in frightening images of dangerous, violent prisoners: men, usually, who are just
barely contained by the criminal-justice system” (p.142). Because of this captivation and
general perception, media continues to produce precisely what is craved, understood, and
produces the desired ratings, continuing to frame not only prime-time television, but
through lack of coverage and the imparting of true information, news information as well.
The issue with the framing of prisoners and prisons, however, is that the actual subject
remains relatively invisible, so stated Prison Communication, Activism, Research, and
Education (P-CARE) (2007):

> We are so saturated with images of crime and criminality that
incarceration has become a routine part of our daily consumerist practices
and political assumptions, yet actual prisons and prisoners remain virtually
invisible in television news and entertainment. (p. 407)

In commercial-entertainment industries, intensely dramatic settings or visually
compelling images are good for corporations whose primary focus is to profit on the
processed text (Hartnett et al., 2013). Images and stories regarding prison life and the
perception of danger and deviance associated with incarceration can easily be translated
into media spectacles used to captivate the audience and create profit.

The trouble this incurs, then, is how real-life situations are portrayed because of
the framing. Hartnett et al. (2013) and Kellner (2003) both agreed that media culture
contributes vastly to social and political issues, often times deciding what is important,
real, and vital to the public.

From real-crime dramas like *Lockup* (2005) and *America’s Most Wanted* (1988)
to fictional television like *Oz* (1997) and *Prison Break* (2005), American television is
saturated with images of crime and violence, and the concept that all those incarcerated
are the aggressive form of criminal. Because of this, despite the fact that crime rates have not gotten worse at the same time incarceration rates continues to rise, Americans still report feeling unsafe (Donziger, 1996).

This feeling of vulnerability from the public is a call politicians have answered, getting elected on “tough stance” policies meant to make Americans feel safer, but resulting in higher and tougher penalties with little focus on education and community (Donzinger, 1996; Hartnett et. al, 2003). Imprisonment is a politically attractive answer because an individual behind bars cannot hurt the public, but that response is deceptive considering not all crimes come with a life sentence nor are all crimes violent with those incarcerated a danger to the public (Donzinger, 1996).

While there appears to be an absence in news-media coverage on incarceration, there are entertainment documentaries, dramas, movies, and music aimed at making a spectacle of life behind bars. By allowing the images of violence to stand alone, there becomes little ability to make a comparison to reality because the concept of real prison life isn’t something readily accessible to the average person.

Donzinger (1996) called to question the accuracy of the polling data which leads to crime policy, revealing that while most Americans feel strongly about imprisoning violent offenders, they do not feel this way about non-violent offenders. Because of this, it can be ascertained that with the rise in incarcerations, but not necessarily violent crimes, the American population is not well-informed about who is being locked up. Considering the most widely distributed information Americans receive on prison culture and crime is sensationalized and dramatic, this is not a surprise.
Trajectory of Incarceration. Despite the high incarceration rates, there seems to be a lack of knowledge base on the effect incarceration has as a deterrent, a criminogenic effect, or a null effect (Bhati & Piquero, 2007). In a study conducted by Bhati and Piquero (2007), it was found that incapacitation, or incarceration, acted a deterrent 40% of the time, 56% were incapacitated from committing crimes, and 4% exhibited criminogenic behavior. Of note was that 40% of those released returned to criminal activity lower than what was expected.

It must be noted, however, that many former prisoners are released and go on to live alongside other former prisoners, which carries implication for criminal opportunities, particularly in regards to scare resource, such as the poor job prospects facing ex-inmates (Morenoff & Harding, 2014).

Looking at communities with higher rates of prison admission and release, Morenoff and Harding (2014) found the communities had a higher crime rate. This validates the media framing because it becomes easy to look at crime ridden communities and determine ex-inmates will never change, just like what is being represented in television programs. This feeds the public fear of inmates when television programs do not focus on the positive effects of rehabilitation.

Philosophical Basis

While the rationale for imprisonment includes public safety and atonement for crimes, an understanding of the goal of incarceration must be established.

Within framing, the idea of public safety and keeping dangerous, violent offenders away from the public becomes a central theme; however, with the low rate of
violent crimes actually accounting for those individuals incarcerated, the purpose of incarceration to exact retribution for a crime is more commonly the use of incarceration.

Within the realm of those fighting for prison reform surfaces the concept of restorative justice, which favors rehabilitation. The Insight Prison Project located in California, a state with high incarceration and overcrowding, described restorative justice as:

A philosophy and a social movement which provides an entirely different way of thinking about crime and victimization. Our current retributive justice system focuses on punishment, regarding the state as the primary victim of criminal acts and casting victims and prisoners in passive roles. Restorative Justice, by contrast, focuses on healing and rehabilitation. It incorporates a strong human rights analysis that emphasizes the factors of race and class in the over-incarceration of people. It assumes that the persons most affected by crime, victims and offenders, should have the opportunity to become involved in resolving the conflict. The goals of restoring losses, allowing prisoners to take responsibility for their actions, and helping victims move beyond their sense of vulnerability stand in sharp contrast to the conventional focus on past criminal behavior and increasing levels of punishment. (“Insight Prison Project”)

Tsui (2014) had a similar description of restorative justices as a way to rebuild a sense of justice to the victims, the offender, and the community. This idea contrasts drastically to the media framed idea of incarceration.
In order to move away from the confines created by media framing, the capacity for restoring justice and rebuilding community can take precedence for non-violent offenders if the public can see the efficacy of rehabilitation and education.

**Rationale**

The United States of America has become the leader in incarceration, and incarceration has become the most implemented government program America offers despite the lower crime rates (Hartnett et al., 2013). With 20% of U.S. prisoners being illiterate, and another 20% being functionally illiterate, education surfaces as a credible solutions to the “incarceration nation” America has become (PCARE, 2007), where about two-thirds of released offenders succumb to recidivism resulting in re-incarceration (Cooper, Durose, Snyder, 2014).

Education reduces recidivism (Hartnett, Wood, & McCann, 2011), and despite this knowledge, incarceration rates still climb because “Americans have been taught to turn a blind eye to the fact that the business of imprisonment now drives our crime and justice debates” (Hartnett et al., 2013). The needed programs cannot prosper when the voting public has a sensationalized or inaccurate view of the population the programs would be serving.

While media images and framing are influential, they are not all-powerful, and research must steadily be conducted regarding the content in which incarceration is portrayed. Because viewers still have the capacity to question and resist, research into prison portrayal must give them something to question and to resist. Through extensive content analysis, media framing can be used to show the large separation between the
reality and the portrayal. Even more, an understanding of how media framing is taking place could help detach entertainment from reality, and allow a more solid, informed understanding of incarceration.

Until there is an informed, correct, and truthful public understanding of incarceration, reform cannot happen, rehabilitation will not occur, and incarceration rates are likely to continue to rise.

**Research Questions**

Because there is so much benefit to rehabilitating offenders and providing programs aimed at acclimating those incarcerated back into the community in a way that prevents recidivism, barriers must be identified and overcome (Hartnett et al., 2013). Media framing of incarceration is a barrier.

While research has identified the way media has sensationalized crime and made incarceration appear to be limited to only the worst individuals society has to offer, the research has followed more along the lines of agenda-setting, with central focus being what media chooses to present. In framing, the central focus is on how an issue is specifically defined and what audience members are told to think about the information presented.

Due to this gap, this paper’s focus will be on what ways the media frames television programming in popular prison dramas, and how this framing defines prisons and prisoners for audience perception, answering the question: How is incarceration framed within the media, and how do those frames define incarceration?
Chapter 3: Scope and Methodology

Scope

This study utilized content analysis to define the way media frames modern day incarceration. The main question it sought to answer was how the media uses frames to create a definition of incarceration, focusing particularly entertainment programs. To accomplish this, the study looked at a range of television programming from entirely fictional to entertainment documentaries/realities. The fictional television program was Oz (1997), and the documentary/reality television program was Lockup (2005). For this study, the use of pre-existing material was critical in order to define the way incarceration is framed by media.

Though framing exists outside of television programming, and occurs in other mediums such as music and news, the majority of the framing can be found within television programs. Within these mediums, themes can be discerned to help form an accurate understanding of how media represents incarceration to the public.

Methodology

“Content analysis lets you see and reveal the content within a communication source” (Neuman, 2011, p. 362), and was appropriately used to cover ideologies and stereotypes which are defined by media sources for the public. Because content analysis examines specific text, it is the most accurate method to analyze the way different forms of media represent incarceration.

This study was concerned with how the content being presented by media was framed and the definition of incarceration that was provided to the American public as a result of this framing.
**Data Collection.** The data collection for this was composed of two types of wide-reaching text: a fictional television program, and a reality entertainment television program.

It was important to pick text easily accessible to the public and also popular. Programs were chosen on this basis. For the fictional television programs, *Oz* (1997) was utilized. As one of HBO’s more controversial television programs, many found *Oz* to be damaging and dehumanizing to the prison system; regardless, it remains one of HBO’s most popular television programs (Smith, 1999). For this reason, it was important to study this program when analyzing the perception of the prison system.

With an average of 263,000 viewers (Curry, 2011), the television show *Lockup* (2005) provided an analysis for the reality entertainment television program. It is integral to examine what is being presented as reality to the public, particularly because this television program is considered a documentary.

**Data Analysis.** The coding systems that was utilized for this content analysis was both a latent coding system and a manifest coding system. Both coding systems were utilized because a latent coding system, while beneficial in capturing context and not just specific wording, can also be less reliable than manifest coding (Neuman, 2011).

The latent coding will examine the underlying meaning in each text, particularly reoccurring themes. Because a latent coding system can be subjective, guidelines will be in place for specific themes and the manifest coding system will be employed in conjunction with the latent coding system (Appendix A).

The manifest coding tracked both wording and specific images used within the text. The images included violent behavior, drug use, positive behavior, images of
education/success, and illiteracy. The coding book (Appendix A) will encompass both system of coding.

The purpose of this kind of coding was to provide evidence for semantic analysis, or a type of coding in which a researcher identifies subjective meaning and themes within the message (Neuman, 2011). This provided the answer to the question of media portrayal of prisons and prisoners, and helped assign a definition of how prisons and prisoners are actually being framed.

The qualitative approach allowed the researcher to capture and discover meaning once immersed in the data and from that, particular themes, concepts, and generalizations can be made (Neuman, 2011). In order to understand why a nation that seems receptive to educating and rehabilitating its imprisoned population still spends more on incarceration than education, the context in which public perception of those incarcerated is being reduced was analyzed.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical concerns are not a forefront of nonreactive research because the individuals are not directly involved (Neuman, 2011). Because the nature of this study is on pre-existing literature and nonreactive data collections, the physiological and psychological impact is not a presenting issue.

The nature of any study which deals with the impact of individuals’ lives, however, must ensure information is accurately presented in order to allow the public to form opinions based off of fact.
Chapter 4: The Study

Introduction to the Results

This section provides a contextual analysis of the images, portrayals, and representations created of incarceration by the framing in two television programs. It presents the rate of occurrence of specific media frames which inform the representation of incarceration by the media. The findings are discussed in accordance with the major themes previously presented on incarceration and framing, as well as through Entman’s (1993) process of communication. This study will also discuss the implication of sensationalizing incarceration through media framing.

Results of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to analyze the representation of incarceration within the media framing taking place in popular television programs regarding prison and prisoners. This data was recorded using a coding book (Appendix A) aimed at capturing content that contributed to different frames. The importance of this analysis, and the audience interpretation of it, has the power to sway voting and impact prison reform (Hartnett et al., 2013; Donzinger, 1996).

The fictional correctional facility, Oz, focuses on a particular unit within the prison, “Emerald City.” Emerald City is designed to be a rehabilitative unit in which inmates can learn to be productive and accomplish worthwhile work while they are imprisoned. In the first episode of the first season, The Routine, three inmates’ stories serve as the forefront of the episode. Of these three inmates, all are incarcerated for violent crimes, two crimes involved murder, and one involved a drug (see Figure 1). It is
important to note that the drug crime was not a stand-alone crime and was committed in conjunction with the homicide.

![Incarcerate Crimes - Oz](image)

**Figure 1:** Percent representation of the inmates’ crimes resulting in incarceration for the television program *Oz*. Inmates can have more than one crime resulting in incarceration.

Because *Lockup* didn’t provide individualized representation of the inmates, two episodes were analyzed to gain content, background, and representation of the inmates themselves. Season two, episode two, took place in Iowa State Penitentiary, and season twenty-two, episode four, went inside a facility in Cincinnati, Ohio. These episodes were picked due to the ease of access in which they could be obtained. The crimes that resulted in these individuals’ incarceration provided a different mix, though violent crimes among the five inmates continued to have prevalence (see Figure 2B).

**Defining Incarceration.** From the data collected from *Lockup* and *Oz*, the audience is being told that all incarcerates are in prison for violent crimes. Even those serving time for less violent crimes, like drug charges, have committed those crimes in
conjunction with a violent crime – a DUI with a murder conviction, a methamphetamine charge with assault and battery (see Figure 2A).

The lack of background given on the incarcerates discounts what is known about the backgrounds of real inmates, and the negative way rehabilitation programs
were represented, or simply disregarded, provide the audience no basis for understanding the capabilities of the program run in real life (Figure 3).

In most inmates, with the exception of two, family dynamics were not represented. Poor family dynamic included domestic violence, drug abuse, verbal abuse, and neglect. The only two inmates whose background was discussed came from a poor family dynamic (see Figure 4).
Within the units of content measured, prisons were represented by media as a place housing predominately murderous, violent, and uncivilized members of the population. The inmates were not represented in situations garnishing positive rehabilitation, nor were the prison populations accurately represented in correlation to the data real correctional institutes currently provide. The television programs focused on violent crimes or murder in all eight inmates analyzed throughout the two programs, and while drug crimes were introduced, they were done so only in parallel with violent crimes and not as stand-alone crimes.

The offenses represented in the television programs differ from the offenses represented by correctional institutes. Washington State Department of Corrections (2015) lists 13.7% of the prison population offense as murder (murder 1 and murder 2). In the television programs sampled, of the eight inmates’ storylines, seven were incarcerated for murder. It is important to note that of the crimes other than murder, all occurred in conjunction with murder or a violent crime. Using the data provided by the television programs, this mean no inmates were represented as having committed a drug or other non-violent offence as a stand-alone crime. This contradicts Washington States Department of Correction’s (2015) 7.5% of inmates incarcerated for drug crimes, and the other 18.1% incarcerated for property crimes.

Nationally, the Bureau of Justice Statics (2014) reports murder offences as 12.5%, drug offences at 15.7%, and property offences at 19.3%. Though violent crimes account for 53.2%, 46.8% are then lacking realistic representation within the media framing occurring in the television programs analyzed in this study.
It is important to note lack of representation as a form of framing. The television programs’ choice not to represent specific aspects of inmate background presents a significant frame when compared against what is known about likelihood for incarceration. In a report for PBS, Carla Amurao (2013) described the school-to-prison pipeline, an idea that some students are being criminalized rather than educated, as an epidemic among schools. The demographics of the students most likely to be impacted by this epidemic range from race, socioeconomic status, family dynamics, disabilities, and education levels. African Americans, children from poverty, children with disabilities, or from foster homes are more likely to fall victim to the pipeline. This is represented by the 68% of inmates without a high school diploma. Of the eight inmates represented in *Oz* and *Lockup*, for three socioeconomic statuses were not covered, for six family backgrounds were not covered, and only three of the inmates were minorities. This fails to provide representation to the known 59% of black and Hispanic inmates in 2014 (Bureau of Justice Statistics) to the 32% of white inmates (Figure 5).

![Figure 5: Representation of how many inmates followed in the television program were represented as minorities.](image-url)
When looking at how the programs framed prison life and behavior, the audience is given a negative outlook of the incarcerated. Looking solely at the rate of occurrence of specific images, there are only three images of remorse and only three images of the prisoners doing something that could be interpreted as productive – a low number considering *Oz*’s episode highlights a rehabilitative unit within the facility. As for violent crimes, ten images occur; another ten images occur for rule breaking (see figure 6).

![Behaviors While Incarcerated - Scenes of Occurrence Among Highlighted Incarcerates](image)

**Figure 6:** Inmate behavior represented while incarcerated

The facility in *Oz*, though focusing entirely on a rehabilitation section of the prison, Emerald City, is described as a “concentration camp.” This program represented the guards and system in a harsh way, whereas *Lockup* didn’t focus on the guards for the episodes analyzed. *Oz* used four different scenes in which guards spoke negatively about rehabilitative programs and twice the narrator spoke negatively about it. The guards’ only
use in *Lockup* was to give the inmates backstory, which was often times represented much differently from the way the inmate told it.

**Discussion**

“He’s a violent criminal, born to kill, he’ll never change.” This sentiment is expressed by a prison doctor when the director of the rehabilitation unit in the fictional prison *Oz* asks her to give an inmate a job in her medical unit. Throughout the episode this sentiment is expressed by the prison staff, with the exception of the unit director in charge of “Emerald City,” which is a rehabilitative unit inside the facility.

While violent crimes may account for 53.2% of incarcerates nationally (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014), it is important to note that not all violent crimes come with a life sentence. This means many of those convicted of violent crimes will again join the public and need to acclimate into their community. For this reason, understanding the way popular television programs frame and present prison life to the general public is an important factor when considering prison reform, as well as public media literacy.

**Processing communication.** As previously discussed, Entman (1993) developed four processes of communication to understand how a particular message or image is framed: the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture.

In both television programs, the communicator, which is the network, provided these programs for entertainment and ratings. *Lockup* provided an informational element as it describes and presents itself like a documentary. Fontana, who wrote and produced *Oz*, expressed an expectation that he would shatter the expectations for prison programs
(Smith, 1999). This expectation led to sensationalized text regarding prison life and culture.

The text, which was analyzed through re-occurrences of themes and images, supported, in both television programs, a violent and unremorseful culture. From stabbings, committing murder while incarcerated, disorderly conduct with guards, verbally expressing a lack of remorse, and continuing to hear those in position of authority express a poor outlook on rehabilitating the inmates, the text delivered a picture of inmates as less human than the audience watching the program.

The receiver differed a bit between the television shows. With one show, a fictional drama and the other a reality drama, the viewership changes. The accessibility of the programs is also different. *Oz* was an HBO television show, which required a subscription above basic cable, whereas *Lockup* airs on network television.

In regards to the incarceration nation America has been described as, these television program present an argument for America’s infatuation with prison and crime because of their popularity. Because of the narratives offered by the programs, the culture was reaffirmed. Either through a lack of representation for rehabilitation programs, or statements and images against it, much as Hartnett et al. (2013) expressed as a danger of media, the audience received confirmation of the culture portrayed to Americans. A viewer watching *Oz* for the first time, with no background or understanding of the realities of incarceration, would be given the idea that everyday life in prison lacks discipline, relevant or worthwhile work, and consists of violent and aggressive behavior at every corner. Likewise, *Lockup* further confirms that prisons
house only dangerous and violent individuals and, therefore, is working exactly how the system is set up to work.

Framing works through salience and the idea that the audience will notice and interpret meaning from the information presented. For these television programs, the framing presented a hardened view of inmates and prison life.

**Implications.** While it would be naïve to discount violent criminals, it is also dangerous to avoid programs aimed at rehabilitating them, especially when so many will be re-entering the public. In Washington State, only 3.6% of offenders are in prison with life sentences where parole is not an option; 59.9% are in prison for ten years or under (see Figure 7).

![Washington State Prison Sentence Lengths](image)

*Figure 7: Washington State Department of Corrections (2015): Length of Sentences*

Effectively, this means as a resident of Washington, 96.4% of the inmates incarcerated right now have the potential to someday be released. It is this that drives fear and a feeling of vulnerability in the American population when prisons and prison
reform becomes a topic; this fear is a driving force for Americans and politicians alike (Donzinger, 1996). A lack of knowledge and the creation of ideas that prisoners cannot or should not be rehabilitated leads to tougher sentencing policy rather than programs aimed at acclimating those released back into society.

This study analyzed a small portion of what information is available on incarceration. This portion reaffirmed a fear of those incarcerated and a general inability for them to seek to change or be changed.

While it can be expected for entertainment programs to sensationalize aspects of their programs for ratings, in many circumstances, the audience has a general ability to discern what is being sensationalized. When it comes to prisons, it is often something a regular audience member isn’t exposed to. Unlike a television show about love, parenthood, sports, medicine, or politics, most of the general audience hasn’t been, and doesn’t have the ability to, be exposed to prisons and incarceration. With a lack of journalistic reporting from inside the prisons, incarceration isn’t likely to be something the American public has a true interpretation of from media sources (Hartnett et al., 2013).

This means the majority of America’s perception on prisons comes from what media sources are telling them. With viewership as high as it is for prison dramas like Lockup and Oz, the information is misguided and not in line with actual data.

The framing that occurs in entertainment based television programs such as Lockup and Oz define inmates as solely violent and unable to be rehabilitated; individuals who acted randomly and without cause. This not only feeds the audiences’ fear of
prisons and prisoners, it solidifies programs aimed at tougher sentences and less rehabilitation when politicians begin serving their constituents.
Chapter 5: Summaries and Conclusion

Limitations of the Study

Because this is a subject the researcher could not directly access in the form of interviews with prisoners or prison officials, statistics released by government offices, as well as previous research, was greatly relied upon. The main limitation of this study is the scope. With only single episodes in television programs, the study cannot possibly encompass every issue plaguing today’s prison system, nor can it do more than provide a more comprehensive sample of the representation being framed toward audiences.

While choosing popular and highly viewed television programs mitigated the limitation of the smaller selection, news coverage, other television programs and documentations, and social media cannot be discounted for framing studies.

In addition, it should be noted that media literacy, particularly on the audiences’ part, was not examined in this study, and although this study looked solely at framing, media literacy plays a large role in how an audience responds to particular aspects of information being presented.

Within the allotted time, voting records on incarceration policy, a wider scope, and media literacy could not be studied.

Further Study or Recommendations

Though it is limited in some aspects, the study is easily replicated for numerous programs. Because of this, there is extensive room for more in-depth studies as time allows.
This study leaves open the possibility to understand how media framing affects the audience and the importance of how voting policy is reflected because of the way media frames incarceration. Public interviews should be conducted by asking individuals where they receive information about prisons and how they feel America’s current prison system is working. It would be important to note whether people feel crime has gone up, if they think incarceration rates are indicative of crime rates, and what they believe most inmates are imprisoned for.

Another aspect that must be studied is how this public opinion and voting policy impact the prison’s rehabilitation programs. For reasons noted in the previous sections, the idea that inmates are serving time and emerging from prison without literacy or skill a problems needing rectified.

**Conclusion**

In regards to media framing, this study has provided a small sample to show the inaccuracy of media representation. Whether or not the representation provided by media directly influences the audience with enough voracity to sway voting, it is apparent the general public is not presented with factual accounts of prison. From the misrepresentation of crimes resulting in incarceration, to the disparity of racial representations, and lack of background information on the inmates, the public is not receiving information that backs the statistics presented by state institutions. The sensationalized stories reach more of the public than the actual statistics. In these programs, a higher representation is paid to violent, dangerous murderers with life sentences and no real desire or ability to be rehabilitated. The facilities in these programs
paint a bleak picture of the relevance of rehabilitation in prison, and contradict the background and demographic of real prisoners due to lack of information and failure to represent minorities.

It then benefits not only communication scholars, but educators and policy-makers, to understand media framing regarding incarceration as to know why the public reacts as it does and how to combat the situations. It is not likely that, while they are still pulling high ratings, any media outlets are going to stop sensationalizing programs, but in building upon media literacy, and with extensive enough research to understand precisely what has caused the problem, more effective approaches to incarceration and rehabilitation can occur.

Without an accurate frame of reference, an audience cannot be expected to discern reality from fiction. Unlike television programs regarding love, war, friendship, etc., incarceration is not a subject the public has ready access to. The American public is obsessed with crime and punishment television, but largely has no basis to determine whether it is an accurate representation or not.
References


## Appendix A

### General Behaviors While Incarcerated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>00 - Not Shown</th>
<th>Shown</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Inmates are shown doing things against the rules, but for nonviolent purposes (NV)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Inmates are shown doing things against the rules for violent purposes (VC)</td>
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<td>3. Inmates are shown with jobs and/or being productive and pro-social members</td>
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<td>4. Inmates are in educational settings (EHA)</td>
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### Representation of Rehabilitation

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<th></th>
<th>00 - Not Shown</th>
<th>Shown</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Individual is shown in rehab, being educated and making progress</td>
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<td>Inmate A</td>
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<td>Inmate C</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Individual is incapable of being rehabilitated for innate reasons (e.g., low intelligence, vicious)</td>
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<td>Inmate C</td>
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<td>3. Rehab or education process shown failed or failing, convicts fault</td>
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<td>Inmate A</td>
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<td>Inmate C</td>
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<td>4. Individual discusses desire to be in a program but is not in program</td>
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<td>Inmate A</td>
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<td>Inmate C</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education process is shown failed or failing, systems fault</td>
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<td>6. Prisoner has successfully completed rehab or education</td>
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<td>Inmate A</td>
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<td>Inmate C</td>
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<td>7. Inmate offered but refused to be in program</td>
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<td>Inmate A</td>
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<td>Inmate B</td>
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<td>Inmate C</td>
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### Context of Incarceration

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Inmate A</th>
<th>Inmate B</th>
<th>Inmate C</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Inmate comes from poverty?</td>
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<td>2. Inmate had a poor family dynamic?</td>
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<td>3. Inmate is from a low socioeconomic area/community?</td>
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<td>4. Was the inmate a minority?</td>
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<td>5. Was the inmate part of a gang prior to incarceration?</td>
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<td>6. White collar criminal or inmate from higher socioeconomic strata</td>
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<td>area/community?</td>
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### Wrongful Imprisonment or question about judicial process/outcome

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inmate A</th>
<th>Inmate B</th>
<th>Inmate C</th>
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</table>

### Representations of the System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The program represented the prison guards as:</td>
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<td>uncaring</td>
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<td>protectors</td>
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<td>lazy</td>
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<td>corrupt</td>
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<td>2. The program represented the prison system in:</td>
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<td>a celebratory light</td>
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<td>a critical way</td>
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<td>a dehumanizing way</td>
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