Prison Zines: Relations, Communication, and Records

Ashley L. Huot

ahuot@ualberta.ca

University of Alberta

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Incarcerated people are faced with institutionalized information poverty, or information marginalization, which restricts their ability to seek access to, interact with, create, and share information. There have been continuous efforts made to address the information needs in prisons and make forms of information seeking available to inmates. Responses to information poverty can also come in the form of providing incarcerated people with modes of creating and sharing information, such as through making and publishing zines. As a diverse visual and textual multimedia form of self-publication, zines have historically given voice to marginalized communities. Through the production of zines, inmates can build accessible modes of self-expression, connection, and create a record of their community's experience. Zine making in prisons can provide a valuable responsive form of creation, communication, and give voice to incarcerated peoples who face institutionalized information poverty.

1. **Defining Information Poverty and Information Marginalization**

As there is a need for increased information access in prisons, there is a need for modes of self-expression and information creation. Prison access needs are apparent from advocacy and research; with libraries, educators, and prisons themselves among those responding to address information needs within the incarceration context. Incarcerated people's access to information and their information behaviors are shaped by the context of institutional confinement. The persistent lack of information access and inequity inmates experience can be described in information research as information poverty, typically characterized as "...the result of social

factors, embodied by various types of information-related inequalities, information literacy, lack of broadband access, or lack of information resource because of low income or education...” (Gibson & Martin, 476). Britz (2004), similarly connects information accessibility to forms of social justice and defines information poverty as:

That situation in which individuals and communities, within a given context, do not have the requisite skills, abilities, or material means to obtain efficient access to information, interpret it and apply it appropriately. It is further characterized by a lack of essential information and a poorly developed information infrastructure (194).

Information access issues can often be addressed by applying infrastructure or resources, but as Gibson and Martin state, information poverty is “...more deeply embedded into the social and political structure of a place, community, or institution” (467). Incarcerated people in particular face systematic institutionalized information poverty, wherein the information needs of prisoners are often created by the experience of prison itself (Rabina, Drabinski & Paradise, 291). The experience of prison often causes anxiety and limited information about re-entry, employment, housing, health, and other everyday life information needs. Gibson and Martin (476) criticize that much of the early discourse around information poverty has focused on the behaviour of individuals experiencing information poverty rather than the institutions that create the conditions of information poverty. They highlight the problematic aspects of measuring the supposedly information poor against cultural standards that reflect the least marginalized population, as these views can suggest that individuals or communities deemed information poor self construct their own information poverty. Similarly, Pollak (1233) discusses that using the

term "poor" in relation to information and wellness "...invokes a number of problematic metaphorical and rhetorical constructs that reify a power dynamic thus reinforcing the proposed problem rather than solving it" (Pollak, 1233). If libraries providing services focus their view only on the impoverished, this can "...leave the social, political and economic contexts that produce various information gaps unquestioned," framing information needs through the lens of poverty can also create "...a dangerous binary: Incarcerated people are poor and libraries and librarians are rich" (Rabina, Drabinski & Paradise, 292). This can fail to recognize the systematic and institutional causes of information poverty and can disregard the sophisticated and adaptive information-seeking behaviour, and practice skills that incarcerated people possess. Gibson and Martin suggest adopting a theory of information marginalization rather than information poverty, which describes "...systemic, interactive socio-technical processes that can push and hold certain groups of people at social "margins", where their needs are persistently ignored or overlooked." (467). Because inmates exist within an institutional marginalized information environment, their information behaviours and practices are deeply informed by this context. This essay will use the term information marginalization to describe this experience.

2. Prison Information Marginalization

Prisons as institutions intentionally and indirectly enforce information marginalization on incarcerated people. Most inmates face limited access to print materials, the internet, instant connections, and other information resources in addition to the information access often being controlled by power motives, institution policies, and staff decision making (Rabina, Drabinski

& Paradise, 292). Often prison educators are only able to provide course-related materials to students, leaving partnered organizations, libraries, and mail correspondence the only forms of receiving materials. The Canadian Federation of Library Associations adopted a position statement on prison information rights stating that "For inmates in Canadian correctional institutions, reading, and access to information is a rare connection to the outside world. It is also a basic right" (Prison Libraries Network, 1). From a librarianship point of view "Inmates need diverse materials and information to support their legal needs, rehabilitation, literacy skills, language needs, personal and cultural interests, recreational reading and lifelong learning, including technology awareness and access" (Wurmann, 16). Inmates do not relinquish their information rights upon incarceration. However, many prisons have complex approval, screening, and censoring processes for information and materials entering prisons that are sometimes arbitrary and loosely defined (Wurmann, 16). This combined with little or no funding to support information services in prison greatly limits access to information. In this environment, freedoms such as those of belief and expression have a heightened importance for incarcerated people, where "confinement, prejudice and social alienation" disregard incarcerated people in society (Prison Libraries Network, 1). This increased need for freedoms of expression are a result of the prison environment. Wright asserts that prisons are spaces of confinement not only physically, but psychologically where "...confinement also breeds the desire for community: for a sense of shared oppression within an isolating environment…" (Wright, 106). However, even with this knowledge, limited and inconsistent access to information, print materials, and the internet continue to force significant information barriers on incarcerated people. Also acknowledged is the function of incarecal institutions in perpetuating colonialism socially and

politically. The overrepresentation of Indigenous people in Canadian prisons, speaks to the specific importance of providing Indigenous information materials as well as forms of expression for Indigenous inmates (Prison Libraries Network, 1). Despite limitations, educators, librarians, and other community partners can mitigate the impacts of prison's institutional information marginalization through their advocacy and programming.

3. Information Sharing and Creation

In addition to supporting inmates in accessing information, supporting the sharing and creation of information can counteract the constrained prison information environment and support information resilience. The information behaviour and skills of inmates are reflected in Pollak's (1233) discussion of Hersberger's introduction of the notion of information resilience, which can aid practitioners, or library services, in recognizing the remarkable preserverity of disadvantaged populations. Chatman's (208) study of information behaviour of inmates highlights that communities and individuals experiencing information marginalization adapt to create their own complex information ecosystem. She describes information, not as something people have or don't have, but rather, something shared, created, and held by groups in the round, characterizing information in the prison context as:

...a performance. It carries a specific narrative that is easily adaptable to the expectations and needs of members of a small world. It also has a certain form. In this situation, the form is interpersonal, and for the most part is being used by insiders to illustrate ways of assimilating one's personal world to the world of prison life (208).

Inmates, despite having constricted access to information outside of the prison, continue to create and share information with each other in their small world. Wilson's (1) notion of the third space that is created by literacy oriented activities, practices, and materials within prison corresponds with Chatman's articulation of inmate's adaptive information behaviours, stating that:

...while people in prison are unable to access their various social worlds and unwilling to be drawn into the realms of prisonization, they seek to define a third space in which to live out their day to day prison lives. This space is driven by its own culturally-specific and culturally-defined discourse, at the heart of which lies literacy-related activities, practices and artefacts (1).

The third space is where an inmate can enact social and contextualized practices from the outside world, returning to familiar ground to resist the incarceral experience (Wilson, 199). This suggests that incarcerated people have "..their own culturally-specific discourse, generated, influenced, and sustained by the interrelation of these notions of prison and literacy" (Wilson, 52). Despite information marginalization, complex and unique information ecosystems exist within the context of prison where inmates create and share information.

Chatman (208) suggests that information is something interpersonal that is held, shared, created, and communicated by groups of people, functioning like a narrative. In defining information partly as an active creating performance, this speaks to not only the great need for more consistent access to information resources in prisons, but also a need for mediums of creation, expression, dialogue, and connection as a form of information. In this environment of information marginalization alongside social alienation, physical and psychological constraint, supporting opportunity for self-expression is valuable. Zines are a multimedia mode of

expression that can address information marginalization by meeting the need for active information creation and sharing in the prison environment.

4. Defining Zines

Zine making as a process is an accessible and relevant platform of self-expression and sharing for marginalized and isolated groups such as incarcerated people. As a flexible form of communication, they provide a tool to exercise rights of opinion, belief, and self-expression through many combinations of visual and textual expression regardless of literacy or education level. Zines as culturally resistant self-published materials have historically existed on the margins of society, giving voice and agency to marginalized groups or opinions outside of dominant views (Kucsma, 1). Although the emergence of the internet and social media has allowed new forms of voice and dialogue, zines continue to serve as a unique multimedia platform in marginalized communities. Zines are "...difficult to define and reify due to their individual and eclectic natures", but can generally be understood as simple handmade amateur and non-commercial publications (Chidgey, 2). They often consist of visual arts and literature combinations typically reproduced through printing on simple paper and bound by stapling or hand sewing. Often self-published or published by small independent presses, their simple materials allow them to be easily mass-produced with little cost and if desired, no author. Wright (6) suggests that zines as self-published materials are innately subcultural as they exist uniquely outside of the filters of mainstream publication, having the opportunity to express opinions often ignored by mainstream media. In this regard, they have historically been a unique platform for marginalized views and experience.

5. Zines as Creation and Expression

Zines have a particular power to enact voice in oppressed groups, especially in isolating spaces dominated by information marginalization, such as prisons. Gual (17) interviews inmates and partners in zine making outside prisons, discussing the role marginalization, both before and during their incarceration, has in inmates feeling they are not entitled to share their voice. For incarcerated people the making of zines can establish a space of creation and voice in an environment that is typically restrictive, through a diverse medium of images or writing. As a multimedia text, zines making is a platform open to diverse interpretations. This makes them an approachable and accessible medium for expression, allowing for inmates to use a style or mode that suits them. The content of zines can range from a nearly endless list of collage, drawings, and poetry to open letters, lists, stories, and calls to action. Zine contributions can address past, present, or future expressions that may or may not be specific to the incarceration experience. Some zine contributors may communicate to an open audience or a specific person, expressing, discussing, or challenging ideas through text such as life stories, poetry, art, or rap with perspectives on confinement, culture, injustice, trauma, faith, parenting, protest, or any other interest. They may also openly create to seek or share advice and knowledge. Some contributors may express themselves through stylistically diverse visual art forms as self-expression or identity exploration. The history of the function of zines, its subcultural value, simple production, and diverse interpretation through multimedia make it an approachable form of expression and creation. Their cost-effective production makes them simple to produce within prisons by inmates or through supporters outside the prison walls. Within the constraints of a

prison context, zines can be a platform for expression and a resurgence of voice in response to an environment of information marginalization.

6. Zines as records of Collective Experience

While zine creation is a platform for information creation, sharing them creates opportunities for relationships, community, and a record of experience. As Gaul asserts, "prisoners connect through that analogue world of face-to-face, hard copy, or not at all" (16) making zines within the context of incarceration important in their potential to create communication between inmates and the world beyond the bars. Every zine is unique and in creating a regular succession of zines within prisons, the many voices can capture an ongoing narrative that builds on itself and contradicts itself through its many authors. In Wright's (16) discussion of zines specific to Women's Prison Zines, she establishes that zines commonly being co-authored mediums, can also function as a collective autobiography uniquely shaped by the experience of incarceration. She notes both the frequent use of the third person in zine writing that creates opportunity for both a communal narrative and the singular narrative that focuses on an expression of agency. These shared experiences contrasted with individual perspectives can reflect and communicate the nuanced experience of incarcerated people, acting as "...a space to call out and be heard..." (16).

As Chatman (207) alludes to, the active creation of information in the closed world of a prison is uniquely shaped by its confining context. This makes zines created in this environment deeply informed by the context of incarceration and marginalization. By capturing diverse forms of expression and the experience of incarceration as a collective autobiography, they build a

sense of community experience and can function as records of cultural memory (Cox, 77). When shared outside of the prison they can draw attention to "a largely obscured and forgotten world" (Wright, 6) and potentially build relationships and solidarity between people, organizations, and services. Zines can also be made in collaboration with inmates and people outside of the prison. Gual interviews zine makers that create publications outside of prisons that feature information about resources for newly released prisoners, essays on political and social movements, and interviews in combination with submissions from inmates themselves. These zines can then be distributed in prisons that allow inmates to receive publications. This relationship of sharing can form support inside and outside the prison walls. Zines in prisons can also function as a communication tool when shared between inmates or across geographic barriers to other incarceration institutions, forming connections through sharing of personal and collective history of struggle, stories, resistance, confinement, injustice, and healing. Wright (107) notes that inmates can develop meaningful relationships through the communication of zine sharing regardless of never being in the same space. The opportunity that sharing zines creates for dialogue, solidarity, and recording of the prison experience, is a valuable way of responding to the constraints of information in incarceral institutions.

7. Conclusion

Although information marginalization continues to be challenging to address in prisons, zines can help to respond to information barriers as a form of information creation and sharing. In the physically and psychologically restrictive prison environment, part of addressing information marginalization is providing opportunity for information creation. Zine-making

within prisons provides people in an environment dominated by institutionalized information restrictions the responsive opportunity to create, communicate and share. Zines have historically provided accessible multimedia modes of expression for marginalized groups, utilized in prisons they can provide inmates with a voice and connection to the world. The diverse medium of the zine makes it an approachable form of expression encompassing many styles of visual arts and literature that can reflect communal and personal experience through seeking, observing, sharing, and being heard. In sharing prison-made zines within, between, and outside of prisons, inmates have the rare opportunity for communication and connection that reflects and is shaped by the experience of incarceration. This can respond to the information marginalization experienced in prisons by providing a resurgence in voice and expression while sharing can build valuable relationships, solidarity, and a record and understanding of a community's experience.

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