

Innovating Prison Press Freedom

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The American debtors' prisons, a product of the 18th-century, spurred an innovation in institutional journalism that lives on in contemporary internet technologies and practices.

In 1800, in response to his imprisonment in a New York City debtors prison William Keteltas—an “articulate, well-educated, and clever attorney with a practice on Broadway (Morris, 1998, p. 20)—founded the United States’ first prison press. Supported by advertisers and non-inmate subscribers, intended for a non-prison audience, and containing (among other items) editorials, poetry, a map of the prison, and first-hand observations of inmate life, Keteltas used the *Forlorn Hope* to advocate for the closure of all debtors prison (Baird, 1967). The innovation—a newspaper created by one man as a vehicle for individual and collective advocacy within the norms of journalism as they were then—was designed to fundamentally change an 18th-century instrument of public control. The paper was created to argue against the logics that sustained debtors’ prisons and force a public conversation about the social and legal conditions that sustained them because Keteltas said that it was “impossible to [reform] by petition, as forcibly as through the medium of a paper.” (Morris, 1998, p. 20) There was something about the technological form or the cultural meaning of the *newspaper*, as it existed at the close of the 18th century that, to Keteltas at least, served as the ideal vehicle for making radical public change.

Jumping ahead to present day—jarringly so, as there is a rich and varied history of prison presses—what kind of technological forms and social meanings allow *contemporary* prisoners to advocate for radical changes to the logics that sustain their incarceration? Inspired by both the *Forlorn Hope* and Chatman’s observations that prison “life in the round” (Chatman, 1999) often requires prisoners to adopt communication practices that let them survive in the “small world” of prison, my aim in this project is to understand how contemporary forms of the prison press might serve as boundary infrastructures (Bowker & Star, 1999, p. 287) for making the kind of change Keteltas demanded in 1800. Spanning the symbolic and material worlds of institutional incarceration, networked technology, and journalistic practice, what kind prison press innovations might help inmates survive their small worlds and challenge the larger ones that put them there?

In my early empirical explorations of this question I focus on one such contemporary experiment, conducting a close reading of the publicly available Twitter feed (The Last Mile, 2014b) and Quora account (The Last Mile, 2014a) maintained by inmates in San Quentin prison’s *The Last Mile* program. The program is designed “to train selected participants for eventual employment in a paid internship program within the Silicon Valley technology sector” (The Last Mile, nd) and involves inmates posting tweets and answering Quora questions via a team of volunteers who transcribe their

responses onto the respective websites (Madrigal, 2012). Although *The Last Mile* does not self-identify as a news organization (indeed, San Quentin already has *The San Quentin News*), the reason Quora executive Marc Bodnick says his company supports *The Last Mile* sounds somewhat similar to Keteltas's motivation for founding the *Forlorn Hope*:

Being in prison is obviously an experience most of us don't have. It's hard to understand what it's like or to have empathy or to understand the lives these folks lead. We have just given these guys an audience like any other person on the site who writes well. (Guynn, 2013)

But is *The Last Mile* a prison press? How do its mission and dynamics resemble or differ from what we know about the *Forlorn Hope*, or other historical prison presses? How do their respective technological forms, social meanings, audience orientations, and capacities for prison reform differ? If it behaves much like a news organization, how is *The Last Mile*'s press freedom a function of its relationship to the networked architectures and cultures of Twitter and Quora? Despite *The Last Mile*'s seemingly innovative nature due to its use of networked technology, how does its radicalness and capacity to spur prison reform compared to historical prison presses? Does *The Last Mile* facilitate critique of the very underpinnings of incarceration as the *Forlorn Hope* did? What normative demands might contemporary, internet-distributed prison communication need to make of social media like Twitter and Quora to ensure that it can produce the kind of radical public change that Keteltas founded the *Forlorn Hope* to make?

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