

## Reform: The "Other" Block Entity (Television)

Prison reformers must consider an often overlooked force in a prison block: A individual entity, them can make or break the peace of a block.

The television set is the 35<sup>th</sup> member of our block. Reformers should consider the influence, - for good and bad - of this "entertainment" and "educational" member of the block.

No religious or political zealot, no vocal gang member, no "convict" has more power over the attitudes of inmates in this block than the TV. It is a super-peer.

A few (very few) prisoners can ignore - do without - TV programming here. Others argue over the "quality" of one program over another. A prisoner's unique ideology, culture, associations, and relationships in the past can cause passionate arguments over the TV. I saw an inmate throw 2 TVs to the floor in an argument over programming.

To be truthful, can anyone program a TV for 7 days and please all the 34 inmates in the block? Do prisoners pay the "TV Business Programmer" a bribe for him to schedule a particular sports or music program using the sacred TV remote?

TV programs enter the mind. For good or ill.

2 He who controls the TV Remote makes the gold (selects the programs.) He is not revered but is "appreciated" for this formidable power in the block. Like any politician, he tries to favor a majority with his choices. Sometimes he may be more dictatorial, selecting the programs he likes. A schedule is produced and technically approved by staff.

TV Block Programmers have been known to use the power of the remote to change the schedule without approval. This can cause anxiety and frustration by those in the Block who may feel that their input is not appreciated.

Most inmates - at least in this block - find some compromise by agreeing on a number of movies and a number of sports programs. Unlike some camps with two TVs per block, ours only has one.

Does education level, outside cultural values, and individual philosophies of what is good TV and what is bad TV influence choices and arguments in the block? Yes. Can one "group" have more power over choices than another - such as political, religious, or other identification?

Of course.



3 Why does TV programming need reform? Block by block choices are different - which may reflect a more balanced approach in another block to varied and diverse programming.

In This block I have a vocal request for national news programming - once in the morning and once in the evening. At first my opinion was met with resistance, but over time the viewership grew and more Block members appreciated - Through experience - The news - basically because these programs did not replace sports, videos, and some long running series.

Inmates from other camps have told me that staff selects programming - blanketing the units with bland programs, there.

There were rumors a few years back that some legislators wanted TV removed from prisons altogether.

The reactions to removing TVs would be catastrophic - prison is a boring place, and sometimes the only mental education a person gets beyond a 4th grade level may be on that TV.

24

If The Block prisoners' programming focuses on "good" selections, TV can be a benefit to ones mental and physical health. There is a (usual) calming effect. It is no secret that prisoners may be dealing with internalized shame, anger, remorse, loneliness etc, TV can give one a break from these often self-destructive feelings.

Yet it can be a Two-edged sword. TV programming can excite and aggravate intense personal feelings, leading to very real dissension and arguments bordering on the violent in a block - in particular political, racial, and religious programming of a hostile nature to a personal attitude or belief. TV can lead to violence.

Lately, I notice prisoner attitudes towards diversity and equality shifting as more prisoners are encouraged (by TV) to express their feelings about heretofore sensitive subjects that can breed controversy. TV can bridge gaps in understanding, but not if 80% of the programming is focused on violent, misogynistic, racist, hostile, sexual rape or bias.



5

I don't want to be too harsh about judging TV programs presented in This Block. There is some ongoing discussion about programs that denigrate and dehumanize women and other groups. Talking about this invites anger - at least in here.

Here's a sampling of our (mostly) weekly programming. (The block is about 7 White and 23 Black. A mix of most religious faiths and three gay associations. About 7% use drugs or smoke cigarettes regularly. Most are from lower-income social-economic neighborhoods. Education levels vary from 7<sup>th</sup> grade, to High School / GED, to college degree. Mix of interests.

TV weekly (sample) in This block. POPULAR SHOWS.\*

- 7AM: CNN, Local News
- 8AM Remodeling Houses
- 9AM Cheaters\*/OR Rewind\*/"Rediculousness"\*
- 10AM Sports\*
- 12 Noon Local News \ BET\* \ FUSE videos\*
- 1PM 48 Hours\*/or Fatal Attractions\*/OR BET\*
- 5PM Maurice (Who is The Brip) <sup>Daddy?</sup>
- 6PM Local News
- 6:30PM: Evening ABC World News
- \* AFTER 6:30 / movies, special attractions.

TV is crucial to our mental health, especially now that the Pandemic forces us to be quarantined in our blocks for most of the day. How much Maury can you watch? We have one newspaper copy to share in the block, unless we are one of those who hide the paper. Hoarding happens. "Buck" happens.

We have no access (at this time) to a tablet, computer, internet, copier, or typewriter! Can you imagine the medical tools we use to communicate? - Carbon paper. ✓

Pen. ✓ Paper. ✓ This is during an era when letter-writing on the outside has been reduced in favor of Emails. We can't get Emails. Our research is limited to a used book (mostly) library and very old encyclopedias, or whatever the person chooses to share.

We use cheap radios with cheaper headsets (mostly) to "hear" the TV program, as the set is on mute.

I cannot imagine the trouble that would develop if 33,000 NC inmates were denied the civilized right to free speech, free press, free expression and the right to use TV to energize our efforts at rehabilitation. We need more supervised balance in TV programming. No one person should dictate — what enters our minds.



7

I was a Block TV programmer with the "magic" Remote once, at another prison, where there were two TVs in the block - one for movies, which I scheduled - and another for sports which another inmate scheduled. Two sets in a block reduced arguments.

For every five prisoners pleased by my film selection, there were three who were not pleased. I considered that ratio a success. How could they prefer "CONAIR" over "LORD OF THE RINGS?" OR "Maury" over "National Geographic?" Our uniqueness informs our entertainment choices.

The stress of trying to please everyone was too much and I passed the remote "wand" on to another more attuned to the likes of a majority. The Remote controller must be a person considered to be "balanced" in his choices.

As long as I get to watch The World News, to stay connected outside this fence, I can grit my teeth and, eyes glazed over, repeat the dialogue of "Young Guns" again and again, Repeat by repeat.

Still - Reform would seriously reduce tensions caused by almost daily TV program conflicts. That would be good for everyone.