

**Making Waves Behind Bars:
The Story of the Prison Radio Association**

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ABSTRACT

Prison radio is a particularly valuable contribution to the investigation of opportunities for social activism and the potential of radio for social change, able to support prisoners through their sentences and contribute to reducing re-offending. This study is the first to document the growth of UK prison radio, focusing on the accounts of the people involved in the formation of the Prison Radio Association (PRA). Established in 2006, the PRA was the first organisation of its kind internationally. Initially set up to network and support individual prison radio projects, it has now grown to the extent of creating and managing the world's first National Prison Radio service. This research outlines the process through which relatively small-scale media activism, based on prisoners' rights, came to be an intrinsic part of prison culture, playing a central role in institutional operations. It considers prison radio growth within the context of the economic reworking of broadcasting, prisons, and social activism in post-Thatcher Britain, acknowledging the emergence of the PRA as both a product of New Labour technologies of governance and of the counter-discursive opportunities they produced. Against a backdrop of public service privatisation and media commercialisation, the development of the PRA illustrates the complex processes of working in partnership with institutions and agencies to develop a prisoner-led service. It is a story which highlights the enduring importance of social values in broadcasting, represents new opportunities for social activism, and presents radio as a powerful force for social change.

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Show me a prison,
Show me a jail,
Show me a prison man,
Whose face is growing pale,
And I'll show you a young man,
With many reasons why,
And there but for fortune,
May go you or I.

Phil Ochs



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