

# Prison Media

Sean Hawkey

The Prison Media programme is run in partnership between Mediaworks and the Department of Correctional Services South Africa. It targets rural and women's prisons in the Western Cape. The project has a media training component and results in the ongoing production of prison newsletters by and for inmates. The newsletters act as an important medium for education, information dissemination and entertainment as well as conflict resolution within prisons. It is designed to function as a 'demonstration model' with a strong emphasis on lobbying with the long-term goal of institutionalizing arts and media/communication training as an integral part of rehabilitation programmes within South African Prisons.

## **Background:**

The programme is based on the success of media training conducted by Mediaworks Rural Programme (MRP) at the Hawequa Youth Centre (Correctional Services) over the past five years and aims to accommodate requests made to Mediaworks to extend these services to other prisons in the rural areas.

The legacy of apartheid has resulted in vast disparities in people's ability to communicate and access information that is relevant to their lives. South Africa's fledgling democracy is dependent on a diverse and accessible media environment that meets the communication needs of all South Africans. Indeed, media has a vital role to play in reconstruction and development, providing people with information and the ability to communicate their needs in the process of transforming their living conditions.

The extent to which media has been successful at fulfilling this role is under question. Mainstream media is driven by commercial imperatives, is inaccessible to the diverse groups that make up our country, and does not reflect the lives or the issues of our many marginalized communities. Both public and private media operate in a top-down manner and are characterized by the one-way flow of information from a predominantly middle class, urban and male-dominated elite.

Community media is commonly regarded as the ideal vehicle to redress imbalances in the media in that it focuses on the communication needs of diverse geographical communities or communities of interest and is accessible to the community it serves. Community media is owned and controlled by the community, thus ensuring empowerment at all levels. Community media promotes the horizontal and vertical flow of communication and is 'bottom-up' in nature.

In the South African context community media tends to target the most marginalized sectors of society. As such, whilst community media is first and foremost a vehicle for social communication and community cultural development, it also plays a very important role as a stepping-stone by previously disadvantaged individuals into the media industry as a whole.

Community media provides entry-level access to training opportunities and facilities for media production, thus giving people the means to exercise their fundamental right to communicate in today's information age.

Mediaworks has been in existence since 1982 when it was established by the Community Arts Project (CAP) to provide media training for community-based anti-apartheid organizations. Mediaworks was registered as a Trust in May 1996. In October 2002, Mediaworks and CAP established South Africa's first Media and Arts Centre, an innovative model in the field of culture, communication and development targeting marginalized communities with a special focus on youth, women, rural communities and civil society organisations.

## **Project Description**

Currently, Mediaworks provides training opportunities as well as access to facilities for media production and distribution for the least heard voices of society, besides a wide range of activities and programmes, including, among others, the Prisons Media Programme ? an integral part of the Rural Programme; High School Media Programme; Workforce Development Programme; the Civil Society Communications Initiative and the Design Studio Networking and Advocacy.

### **Prison Media Programme:**

The outcomes of the training include the production of banners, t-shirts and posters. After training prisoners produce media for local civic structures for events such as World Aids Day and Local Government elections.

The programme has been highly successful in terms of achieving the following goals:

- Building the confidence and self-esteem of prisoners through improved communication
- Promoting basic literacy, media awareness and gender awareness
- Introducing prisoners to career opportunities in the fields of media and communication
- Opening up channels of communication and cooperation between prisoners and local community-based organization
- Improved communication between prisoners and prison authorities.

In 2001, Mediaworks was approached by two additional prisons, Pollsmoor Women?s Section and Malmesbury Prison, to run a similar course. These prisons were particularly interested in the key outcomes of the training being the production of regular prison newsletters as a tool to promote horizontal (amongst prisoners) and vertical (between prisoners and prisons authorities) communication in the prison, to inform, educate and entertain prisoners and to facilitate the use of media as a tool for conflict resolution.

### **Participation of Women:**

Two of the four prisons selected in 2004 will be women?s prisons, despite the fact the prison population is made up largely of men. Inmates will be given the opportunity to input into the course curriculum during focus group discussions during the needs assessment phase. Further input will be solicited during the evaluation process, which is outlined below. The media

awareness module includes a unit on Gender and Communication thus all participants will be exposed to gender issues - both men and women.