What I Know Now:
Radio as a means of empowerment for women of lived prison experience

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Abstract
Incarceration rates are increasing almost everywhere and, while women and girls make up only a small percentage of the overall prison population, there has been a significant increase in their representation – especially over the past 20 years (Carlton and Segrave, 2013). Despite the fact that societies are locking women up at increasingly high rates, the fundamental understandings regarding prison reform are based on a male norm, and do not meet the needs of female offenders (Walmsley, 2016). This article outlines the findings from the first stage of a grassroots action research project conducted with a support group for women of lived prison experience, based in Adelaide, South Australia, to investigate radio production as a means for supporting women in their transition to life outside of prison. The research found that empowerment manifested itself in a number of distinct ways, through both processes and the products of the project. Through the production of radio, women of prison experience recognised their own expertise and took ownership of their stories, while the radio products educated the wider public and validated the participants’ experiences.

Keywords
Action research, arts-led research, community radio, prisoners, prisoner radio, women prisoners

Introduction
The world is experiencing a crisis in the form of a prison population explosion, cheered on by a dominant media discourse informed and inspired by an international ‘tough on crime’ movement (Beckett and Sasson, 2005; Newell, 2013). Incarceration rates are increasing almost everywhere, and especially in Oceania (59.1 per cent between 2000 and 2015) and the Americas (40.5 per cent during the same period) (Walmsley, 2016). While women and girls make up a small percentage of the overall prison population, there has been a significant increase in their representation, especially over the past 20 years (Carlton and Segrave, 2013). International research shows that the female prison population has increased by 50 per cent since about 2000, while the equivalent statistic for male prisoners sits at 18 per cent. Increases in the female prison population in Asia, Oceania and the Americas have been, respectively, five,
four and three times the increase in the population of those continents (Walmsley, 2015). Despite the fact that societies are locking women up at increasingly high rates, the fundamental understandings regarding prison reform are based on a male norm and do not meet the needs of female offenders (Walmsley, 2016). As Segrave and Carlton (2013: 2) insist, ‘there is a need to draw public attention to criminalised women’s lives [and] the contexts that drive injustice and institutionalisation’.

This article outlines the findings from the first stage of a grassroots action research project conducted with a support group for women of lived prison experience, based in Adelaide, South Australia, to investigate radio production as a means for supporting women in their transition to life outside of prison. The researchers recognise that release from prison is not a singular event, but rather ‘part of lifetime trajectories characterised by complex levels of disadvantage, experiences of injustice and oppression, cycles of state intervention (often from an early age), criminalisation and serial imprisonment’ (Segrave and Carlton, 2013: 1). The project discussed here focuses on radio as a means of empowerment, in an attempt to engage creative industries more effectively to address the specific needs of women of lived prison experience. The research found that empowerment manifested itself in a number of distinct ways, through both processes and the products of the project. After discussing the relevance of radio to a prison research agenda, and examining the importance of action research and arts-led methods as tools of social change, we will outline the preliminary outcomes of the project, as well as suggesting future directions for research in this area.

Radio, prisoners and empowerment

Radio remains relatively affordable to make, transmit and listen to, leading to its position as the most enduring, pervasive and democratic media worldwide (Hendy, 2000). It is uniquely positioned because it has the potential to overcome many literacy issues that limit access to print and web-based publications (Waltz, 2005). This is particularly relevant when working with prison communities, which struggle with literacy issues. In the United States, it is estimated that over 60 per cent of adults in the prison system read at or below the fourth grade level (Kutner et al., 2006), while in the United Kingdom, half of the prisoner population can be classified as functionally literate compared with 85 per cent of the general population (Creese, 2015). In Canada, 75 per cent of prisoners have low literacy skills (Abokor, 2003), with 82 per cent testing below a Grade 10 reading level (Nursall, 2012), and in Australia, where Corrections Services are structured at a state level, the Victorian Government reports that only 40 per cent of prisoners have sufficient literacy and numeracy skills to cope independently in the workforce (McDonald, 2015).

Radio has a strong background in participatory community development. In fact, community radio is explicitly a participatory venture – in Australia (where this case study is situated), it is specifically legislated to involve local communities in both production and management. Community broadcasting was founded, according to Rennie, Spurgeon and Barraket (2017: 1), on ‘social good principles’, including but not limited to ‘creating opportunities for media self-representation through direct participation’. Community radio has also been identified as a tool of empowerment. As Forde, Meadows and Foxwell-Norton (2002) describe the Australian sector, it is ‘a site where citizens claim cultural rights … planning a community radio station can be thought of as a process of cultural empowerment’. The Community Media Matters report (Meadows et al., 2007) found that community radio empowers local citizens to participate in their communities in a variety of ways, and that for communities that experience a significant degree of social disadvantage, such as prisoners and their families, community broadcasting provides a critical service. Furthermore, community radio has been found to enable community members to connect through their engagement with
radio programming. This makes it an ideal medium for working with prisoners (Anderson, 2012), who are among the most silent and isolated members of society – and women prisoners even more so, given that the prison system itself has been designed around the male norm.

Previous research (Anderson, 2012, 2013; Bedford, 2014, 2016) shows ways in which radio can be used to engage prisoners in education, to maintain community links and to improve access to services and information. Prisoner radio comes in two main formats that, combined, represent prisoner radio broadcasting by and to communities both inside and out of correctional facilities (Anderson and Bedford, 2017). First, prison radio stations, although few in number, are operated inside of correctional facilities around the world, and used to internally disseminate information, provide a creative outlet and deliver both informal training and, in certain cases, formalised educational outcomes. Second, there are community radio stations (again internationally, albeit in small numbers) that feature prisoners’ radio programs and work with prisoners, former prisoners, their families, friends and support networks to maintain personal connections and broadcast alternative discourses on criminal justice issues. It is within this second framework that this research project is situated.

There is limited published research on the topic of prisoner radio, and most of the literature concentrates on specific case studies with no connecting themes across the research – a limitation the authors seek to address. Anderson (2012) is currently the only comprehensive work on prisoners’ radio internationally; it includes an inventory of prisoners’ radio programs (including prison radio) as well as detailed case studies from Australia and Canada. A few articles have been published that deal with specific issues identified as salient through the study of prisoners’ radio, all within an Australian context. Anderson (2013) uses the Beyond the Bars project to look at relationships between prisoners’ radio and Aboriginal communities. Minc, Butler and Gahan (2007) explore drug policies through a study of the radio program Jailbreak, while Fisher (2009) examines how prisoners’ request shows and other radio forms mediate kinship in Aboriginal communities in Northern Australia.

Prison radio stations are also beginning to attract academic interest. For example, the Prison Radio Association (PRA) and its National Prison Radio (NPR) initiative in the United Kingdom have been examined by Bedford (2014, 2016). Through an intensive focus on an early PRA partnership project with the BBC, the author argues that alternative media have a role to play in redefining and reimagining public service broadcasting values and practice within an increasingly commercialised and fragmented mediascape. According to Bedford (2016), the success and effectiveness of the NPR model was grounded in the importance of gradually building effective partnerships to make it happen. As an independent group, the Prison Radio Association (which established NPR) was able to play a key role in balancing the needs of both the prison service and prisoners while prioritising prisoner involvement in process. Grimes and Stevenson (2012) also touch on the early years of the PRA activity to discuss radio as a tool for rehabilitation and social inclusion. Doliwa (2013) explores the characteristics and roles of prison radio in Poland, arguing that the genre is a form of community radio. In addition, both McDermott (2004) and Allan (2006) argue for the criminal justice impact of early UK prison radio initiative Radio Wanno.

Recognising women prisoners

It is important to consider the specific needs of women in prison, especially given that, on average, two-thirds of women in prison are primary caregivers (Stathopoulos et al., 2012). The Australian Institute of Family Studies (Stathopoulos et al., 2012) has found that the incarceration of women causes disruptions to families disproportionate to the crimes committed. The effects of a mother’s imprisonment on children include developmental problems, social withdrawal and anti-social behaviours that impact on the wider community. In addition, 80 to 90 per cent
of women prisoners are survivors of some form of emotional, physical or sexual abuse (particularly domestic violence and childhood abuse) prior to their incarceration (Johnson, 2004) and many also exhibit high rates of mental illness (Boyd, 2011). The World Health Organization (Møller et al., 2007) recognises that the nature of imprisonment is likely to worsen people’s mental health if they have problems upon entry, or cause mental health problems in some people who are healthy upon entry. Imprisoned women also experience higher rates of disability and of poor mental and physical health than men, and most have histories of drug and alcohol use that are connected to cycles of trauma (Baldry, 2010).

Worldwide, there is a higher rate of recidivism for women, who tend to have shorter but more frequent custodial sentences, typically for non-violent crime that are embedded within the conditions of their lives (Bloom, Owen and Covington, 2003). Despite ‘over a century of rehabilitationist rhetoric [the] majority of women ex-prisoners are repeatedly released back into those same circumstances of poverty and malign neglect which catapulted them into jail in the first place’ (Carlen, 2013: xiii). According to Segrave and Carlton (2013), the increase in the rate of imprisonment and re-imprisonment of women is causally connected to the entrenchment of social disadvantage enabled under the conditions of neo-liberalism.

Release from prison marks a period of heightened precariousness (Carlton and Segrave, 2013), and often means leaving the structure of prison life for chaotic uncertainty on the outside (Baldry, 2010). The instability of women’s post-release mental health often materialises with disproportionately high rates of post-release harm and death, both in Australia and internationally (Segrave and Carlton, 2011) and the needs of formerly imprisoned women often reflect a ‘survival strategy from abuse and poverty’ (Parsons and Warner-Robbins, 2002: 40). Carlton and Baldry (2013: 56) highlight that post-release support programs for criminalised women can often amplify their experiences of institutionalisation, and ‘consolidate and increase women’s experiences of being controlled’ because they extend ‘post-prison governance and control’. Without practical and respectful support that takes the specific contexts of women’s lives seriously, ‘injustice and discrimination are compounded with each incarceration and release’ (Carlton and Baldry, 2013: 60).

Our research opposes a more accepted approach to recidivism that ‘positions disadvantage through the narrow lens of individual failure and social inadequacy’ (Segrave and Carlton, 2013: 4), and punishes and excludes those who cannot or are deemed unable to manage their own well-being. Rather, it aligns with a growing body of feminist scholarship that recognises and critically analyses the role of institutions (including, in this case, media institutions) in sustaining discrimination and the further expansion of correctional service industries (see, for example, the Special 10th Anniversary Issue of the journal Feminist Criminology titled ‘Is Criminology Still Male Dominated?’).

**Methodology**

This article draws on a participatory action research project, which is part of a broader ongoing research program involving the authors and the community organisation Seeds of Affinity: Pathways for Women (known more colloquially as ‘Seeds’). Seeds is a not-for-profit, grassroots, volunteer-run community group that supports women to support each other upon their release from prison. The organisation began in 2006 and was founded by a group of South Australian women with lived prison experience. According to its website, Seeds ‘works together to challenge the ongoing stigmatisation faced by women leaving prison, and to build a community where women felt a sense of belonging, solidarity and self worth’ (Seeds of Affinity, 2016). Carlen (2013: xiv) says women leaving prison tend to prefer, and find more empowering, grassroots projects opposed to ‘the coercive but superficial cognitive programmes provided by
the international in-prison rehabilitation industry’, making Seeds a highly appropriate organisation with which to form an action research partnership.

This pilot project engaged in action research (AR), a method that involves testing ideas in practice as a means of improving social, economic or environmental conditions and increasing knowledge; it is particularly valuable as a means of exploring new media initiatives (Hearn et al., 2009). AR works as ‘a collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that provides people with the means to take systematic action to resolve specific problems’ (Stringer, 1996: 15), and aligns with feminist-oriented approaches to social justice research (Pickering, 2014). According to Pickering, as a community-based approach, AR brings researchers and participants together as partners who ‘contribute unique strengths and share responsibilities to enhance the understanding of the phenomenon under investigation’, which in the case of this project was to investigate how radio production might be useful to Seeds of Affinity (and ultimately more broadly) as a tool to support women of lived prison experience.

This project can also be situated within an arts-led research model, grounded in the understanding that arts can ‘engage in research as a participatory act that allows those involved to more directly express their voices’ (Walsh, Rutherford and Crough, 2013: 121). Arts-based research is also strongly embedded within a social justice methodology, as it emphasises the voice of the marginalised, empowering participants and promoting a more equal relationship between researcher and research participant (Huss and Cwikel, 2005). Our definition of ‘arts’ extends to include radio and other creative industries beyond the more traditional genres of, for example, creative writing, theatre and visual art. Barndt (2004: 230) reminds us that popular communications can democratise art and communication tools integral to grassroots organising, and share ‘the concerns of community arts for socially critical content and participatory process of production’. This is especially the case for community radio. In her work using community radio in Nicaragua as participatory action research to develop a community-based resource management plan, Barndt explicitly describes the processes of making radio as participatory research that affirms people’s knowledge.

While action research and arts-based research methods have been identified and employed as effective and appropriate for working with prisoners, and the formerly imprisoned (see, for example, Jarldorn, 2016; Parsons and Warmer-Robbins, 2002; Pickering, 2014; Walsh, Rutherford and Crough, 2013), there is sparse literature that specifically addresses the outcomes of such projects involving radio. However, AR involving photo-voice is becoming increasingly popular in ways with which parallels can be drawn for the purposes of this article. Photovoice uses photography as means of self-expression, to challenge ‘the politics of representation, providing ex-prisoners a means to surveil operations of power, [and] validate their shared experience’ (Jarldorn, 2016: 213). Pickering (2014: 278) found that formerly incarcerated women involved in a Photovoice AR project used the medium as a means to help the community ‘come to be on closer terms’ and ‘see beyond the label of ex-con’, and the workshops enhanced both the bonding and bridging social capital of the participants. Transformation was identified to have occurred in many ways, on personal, professional and public levels, and not only for the women of lived prison experience but also the researchers and the audiences of the Photovoice exhibitions. Walsh, Rutherford and Crough (2013: 120) identified Photovoice (and other arts-led research methods, including writing and digital storytelling) to be effective approaches to promote the voices of formerly and currently incarcerated women, and to offer opportunities that were meaningful and empowering for the women involved while also contributing to broader change and social justice. They also cite O’Neill (2008) to say that arts-based methods produce knowledge in a collaborative manner, where cooperativity is paramount in terms of success.
The research project gathered data through a number of distinct approaches, mainly:

- ethnographic participant observations and reflection notes taken during and after the workshops
- official documents produced during the project (e.g. project proposal, grant application)
- content analysis of the radio segments produced as a result of the workshops
- content analysis of a one-hour live radio show presented by the participants, and
- audio recordings produced during the training project, but not intended for broadcast.

In essence, these data-collection methods focused on collecting what Wang (2013) has coined ‘thick data’, which provide the story that humanises quantitative data. The concept of thick data is a response to the importance that tends to be attached to ‘big data’. Big data comprise quantitative information that is produced through analysis of large data sets. Although large quantities of information can be generated through this process, more is needed to reveal and/or bridge knowledge gaps, and this can be provided through thick data. Thick data, produced within the realm of ethnography, provide context and connection, and counteract the notion that qualitative data are ‘small data’. This article takes a macro approach to the data gathered and considers the radio project as a whole, rather than focusing on specific aspects such as dominant thematic structures of the broadcast content or commentary on the mainstream media coverage of the project itself.

**Establishing What I Know Now**

It was vitally important to the research team that the project be led by the women at Seeds of Affinity, in the true spirit of action research. Meaningful action research requires close collaboration between practitioners and researchers (Hearn et al., 2009), and therefore the first step was to meet with Seeds members to gauge their levels of interest. We initially met with the organisation without a proposal. Rather, we introduced ourselves as both academics and community radio practitioners who had worked extensively in prison broadcasting before moving to Adelaide. Seeds meets twice a week and a cooked lunch is included as part of this routine; it was over a meal that we shared stories of the radio projects we had either been a part of, or were aware of, with the suggestion that the organisation may be interested in experimenting with radio. A number of those in attendance showed strong interest in radio, bolstered by the close proximity of a local community radio station, WOW FM. These women immediately recognised radio’s potential to reach women both inside and outside prison, as well as the opportunities it presented for building relationships in the local community to raise awareness of the issues faced by women on their release from prison. The theme of ‘what I know now’ emerged almost immediately.

From the very first meeting, there was a strong commitment that the Seeds women wanted to help others who were going through what they already had survived. *What I Know Now* represents the knowledge held by women who have successfully transitioned from a prison sentence to life in the free world – knowledge they wished they had upon their release. According to the Seeds of Affinity members in attendance at the first information session, women in prison, or immediately post-release, are quite often vulnerable, isolated and misinformed about their rights and the support to which they are entitled. This aligns with the scholarship discussed above, describing the period immediately following release as ‘not only usually a traumatic time but … also framed by a woman’s history of previous imprisonments and releases’ (Carlton and Baldry, 2013: 61). It also addresses concerns that ‘re-entry research’ often focuses on failed cases, consequently overlooking the experiences of ‘a significant minority’ who avoid recidivism (Hlavka, Wheelock and Jones, 2015: 407). Conveying the positive message ‘what I know now’ was at the core of the project from its inception, and
informed the direction of the radio series from workshop planning to final broadcast. As one participant said early in the project, ‘So I can feel like I’ve achieved something, so that being in prison hasn’t been in vain, so I can help other people’.

Following the initial meeting, the researchers wrote a proposal for the Seeds of Affinity board of directors to deliver a workshop series to enable Seeds participants to produce a short series of radio features to support women preparing to leave prison. It was envisioned that the features would be broadcast through community and online radio partners with the hope of additional distribution through the Correctional Services. According to the initial proposal, the audio would ‘be used to share experiences and advice to inform women in prison, strengthen family and community links and raise awareness within the wider community’. Once the proposal was accepted by the Seeds of Affinity board, a small amount of seed funding was secured through the University of South Australia, Division of Education, Arts and Social Sciences, Division Research Performance Fund.

**Tangible outcomes**

The project was built around a series of six practical radio production workshops. A small group of four women developed skills in preparing and conducting interviews, recording voice-overs and scripting radio packages, and explored a variety of storytelling techniques to produce a radio series. While only four women were involved in the actual radio production, the workshops were held at the Seeds of Affinity meeting place (a church hall) during the organisation’s regular meeting time. This meant there were always other ‘Seeds women’ listening to the draft work, being interviewed as talent, stepping in as ‘actors’ and providing commentary and support to the broadcast team. At any given moment during a Friday afternoon workshop session, there could be women putting together personal hygiene packs to be delivered to the Adelaide Women’s Prison, casting moulds for the children of prisoners to decorate during visits or cooking biscuits to be sold for fundraising purposes, while the radio team planned its content and conducted interviews in and around the same space. While chaotic at times, this helped to keep the organisation connected to the radio project as a whole, rather than only through the four direct participants. This was especially represented on final showcase day – while the four women presented their live radio show on WOW FM, many other Seeds of Affinity women gathered to listen at the church hall while preparing for a wedding for which they were due to cater the following day.

It was important to begin with small, practical and achievable goals; as such, the team decided on the production of four short radio features. These focused on real experiences and positive case studies to encourage and guide women prisoners through the release process, based around the following themes:

- ‘Seeds of Affinity’ – tells the story of the organisation and the services it provides
- ‘Surviving on the inside’ – gives practical advice on legal rights on the inside
- ‘Surviving when you first get out’ – gives practical advice and guidance including available organisations and services
- ‘How I survived’ – a collection of inspirational stories from women who have rebuilt their lives.

As already mentioned, the project was launched through a live broadcast on a local community radio station. In the hour-long show, the women talked about their experiences of making radio, introduced their stories and selected music. The launch achieved national and local television and radio news coverage, and gave participants a taste of live broadcasting. The radio segments produced by the participants were podcast via a WordPress site and the Seeds of Affinity website, and broadcast through the following outlets:
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- WOW FM (as part of the live launch)
- UniCast internet radio (connected to the School of Communication, International Studies and Languages at the University of South Australia)
- 3D Radio (Adelaide community radio, on The Prison Show)
- Radio Adelaide (community radio)
- SBS Radio Living Black (multicultural, multilingual government funded national public radio)
- Community Radio Network (received by all member stations of the Community Broadcasting Association of Australia).

Discussion: Empowering processes and products

[It gave] women an opportunity to use their voice, because most women are voiceless, so it’s great to hear the women’s voices on the radio.

It’s been amazing, watching the empowerment of women.

Empowerment is a concept that can be tricky to encapsulate – ‘everyone is for it, but rarely do people mean the same thing by it’ (Young, 1994: 48). Empowerment discourse has gained momentum within the field of criminology, especially when framed as a psychological quality that promotes the confidence to control the direction of one’s own life (Pollack, 2000). Empowerment can also carry a community dimension that manifests through ‘sharing experiences, raising consciousness, collective action and advocacy’ (Browne, cited in Pollack, 2000: 76). It was clear throughout the project that the participants themselves used the language of empowerment to define, explain and understand experiences during the project, and as such, our findings are presented within this framework.

Empowerment manifested itself in a number of distinct ways during the project, and is best identified by considering both the processes and products of the What I Know Now project. The processes involved in media production can assist ‘everyday’ people to intervene and transform the mediascape and become empowered to the point where transformations and change are possible (Rodríguez, 2001). At the same time, the radio training workshops gave participants the skills and tools to convert their ideas and knowledge into a media product, a tangible outcome that could be shared with others. This dual analysis allows for a more holistic understand of participatory media projects.

Empowerment through recognition

‘What I know now’ validated the knowledge of the participants, reframing their past experiences as information worth sharing for the benefit of others. This was important not only for the four radio producers but the other members of Seeds of Affinity who were interviewed. For example, in the process of producing the episode How I Survived, there was much discussion about which women at the organisation were considered inspirational in the way they had rebuilt their lives. This sense of pride was passed on from interviewer to interviewees, as the latter were encouraged to discuss their experiences and give advice to the audience, reinforcing the positive choices those women had made since leaving prison:

It was actually really an important part to hear that people do succeed when leaving prison. That they find ways to cope and that there are mechanisms that you can use to find your self-worth and grow again within yourself … Listening to the girls’ stories, their growth, what it felt like for them leaving prison, and their successes, where they are now.
At the same time, the women directly involved in the project were also empowered by being identified as holding important knowledge. When planning for the episode *Surviving on the Inside*, it was originally thought that a lawyer, or similar ‘official’ voice, was needed to explain the legal rights of an incarcerated woman. However, the producer herself already knew the Correctional Services Act intimately from advocating for herself and other prisoners for over 15 years; all that was needed was a shift in perception about who had the authority to provide the ‘official’ voice in that narrative. The defining moment for this particular segment occurred when the participant was able to help herself, rather than turn to an expert voice:

> I chose to do something very important to me as I hear over and over again that the young women in the prison don’t know how to navigate through the maze that is the criminal justice system ... I wanted to help them do that.

**Empowerment through ownership**

The Seeds women held ownership of the project throughout – with the workshop facilitators acting as conduits to achieve the desired outcomes (i.e. acting as a sounding board for ideas, providing technical assistance and editing). This extended to the live radio show, with the participants planning the way they would introduce and discuss this content. Even the simple act of choosing the music to be played in between their pre-produced segments was a meaningful process and allowed another means for the women to convey their thoughts, ideas and inspirations to the audience:

> I think that song celebrates the simple things in life. I think we can get bogged down with the worries of life and life is meant to be enjoyed.

> I chose that song because it keeps pushing me every day to move forward, and that’s what you have to do, you can’t get stuck.

> There’s a line in that song that states that hands are for shaking and not for tying, and I think that’s a great metaphor for how the system treats the individual.

The high level of thought and preparation that went towards both the pre-recorded segments and live radio presentation demonstrates the investment of the participants in making *What I Know Now* a success.

As already mentioned, the *What I Know Now* project produced two main products – the radio segments (which together make a series) and the live radio show on WOW FM that showcased the radio series. There was also a third media output – a WordPress page that podcast the audio content, produced by the research team for Seeds of Affinity to share the material online. These radio products were produced to provide valuable information for women (and, as it turned out, also for men) inside prison, or making the transition to post-prison life. Each episode gave practical information and advice on a wide variety of topics relating to surviving both inside and outside prison – for example, planning for home detention, what is needed to apply for Centrelink (welfare) benefits and how to make sure there is time to bond with a child born during incarceration. This type of content aligned with the original focus of the project – to tell others ‘what I know now that I wish I’d known then’ and to fill the gaps in existing common knowledge as identified by the participants.

**Empowerment through education**

At the same time, these products were also listened to by people who have never been incarcerated. As Walsh, Rutherford and Crough (2013: 122) explain, ‘for true social and political change to occur, not only must marginalised voices be heard, but also they must be able to elicit attentiveness and responsiveness from the mainstream community and its seats of power’. The general public probably knows less about imprisonment than about any other stage of the justice system (Surette, 2007; Roberts and Hough, 2005; Blakely and Bumphus, 2005),
with prisoners ‘barely register(ing) on the daily media radar screen’ (Lumby, 2002: 104). People often do not go to a prison, either as resident, employee or visitor – the 1996 British Crime Survey (as cited in Roberts and Hough, 2005) found four out of five respondents had never been to a prison in any capacity. More often than not, other sources need to be drawn upon for understandings about the prison system. A wide range of cultural products ‘feed the popular imaginary with representations of life in prison’ (Ek, 2005), and such portrayals directly influence political and public support for prison initiatives and reform, as well as the ways in which the wider public perceive prisoners themselves (Blakely and Bum-phus, 2005; Stern, 2005). However, such coverage is often inadequate and often sensational. What I Know Now also manifested empowerment for women of lived prison experience by directly challenging the stereotype of the criminal woman:

Basically it can happen to anyone and the stigmatisation that goes with being a prisoner is very hard to overcome when you’re trying to build a life and assimilate back into the community.

The series focused on positive stories that highlighted the achievements of women of lived prison experience in their lives post-incarceration. It showcased women who had overcome drug addiction, travelled through their work and succeeded in study, not to mention establishing Seeds of Affinity and supporting other women to realise their dreams. The radio series also showcased articulate, compassionate women who wanted to improve opportunities for others, so that their own journey was a little less daunting. It introduced alternative representations of women prisoners (or, more to the point, former prisoners) to the wider public, expanding on the discourses available for discussing issues of law and order, and the criminal justice system. Such representations directly work against what Kendall (2013) describes as neo-liberal policies and practices that rationalise inequality as the consequence of individual failure.

**Empowerment through validation**

According to O’Neill (in Walsh, Rutherford and Crough, 2013: 122), arts-based research practices can create dialogic spaces ‘wherein the mainstream meets with the marginalised’. This was certainly the case for the What I Know Now project, which attracted interest from local and national radio and television outlets of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), the country’s main government-funded public broadcaster. On the morning of the live broadcast, one participant and one researcher were interviewed during a live segment on ABC Adelaide, the city’s highest rating radio station (*In Daily*, 2016). Later in the day, a journalist and camera operator from the Adelaide ABC newsroom visited Seeds of Affinity and interviewed a researcher and a participant before the live radio program, then returned to film during the broadcast, remaining at the radio station for the entirety of the show. The resulting story was broadcast on the national television news service and re-packaged for ABC News Radio. This positive mainstream media coverage of the project and the radio series further empowered the women involved in the project, as it demonstrated the validity of their work outside of the immediate Seeds community. It also had a personal impact on the participants. One participant in particular chose to participate in the radio interview but did not want to take part in television or print media, as she didn’t want to be identified. Following the radio interview, she received a text message from an in-law family member who congratulated her, saying how proud she was and that she was ‘proof that anyone can make a mistake but go on to do bigger and better things’, or words to that effect. As a result, the participant changed her mind and chose to participate in the ABC TV news report, a decision she later said she was very grateful to have made.
Conclusions and future directions

Empowerment through media training comes from being given an opportunity to broadcast one’s voice – a space in the media sphere to feel legitimised, and ideally also to be listened to. In the process of producing the radio segments, the women were able to recognise that, when it came to sharing valuable knowledge related to survival in a post-prison environment, they were in fact the experts. As well as communicating with women (and men) of lived prison experience, the participants also presented content that was meaningful to the wider community within which criminalised and non-criminalised people coexist.

This research project contributes to a sparse yet growing body of work that views transitions from incarceration through the lens of success rather than failure; it also adds to our understandings about the value of arts-led research methods and the role of radio (and potentially other creative industries) in supporting women of lived prison experience. Furthermore, the research highlights the integral role of the participant and promotes action research as a tool for social justice and social change. As mentioned above, this project is part of a broader and ongoing action research collaboration between the authors and Seeds of Affinity. It was the first such venture, and was considered a success by the participants. As verbalised by one radio presenter during the live broadcast:

One of the main things that we’ve gotten out of it is the great partnership with you guys [the researchers] which is really important. Part of the thing about being a women when you come out of prison is that you don’t feel connected to community so building partnerships is really, really important.

An important element of the action research arts-led model is to continually build upon previous work, findings and relationships to create a collaborative cycle of knowledge. This article has outlined a linear pattern of collaboration, creation and content; to create a meaningful cycle, we need to return to the collaboration phase. Recent discussions have revealed a desire to host a regular radio show on WOW FM, and to also hold a listening group inside the Adelaide Women’s Prison to gather formal feedback on the first series of radio segments and seek guidance on the types of content women inside prison would like to hear in the future. It is through these potential ventures that the next phase of research will be developed.

Notes
1 See https://drheatheranderson.wordpress.com/2016/05/27/what-i-know-now.
2 All the indented quotes included in the discussion section of this paper are taken from radio project participants.
3 After broadcasts on The Prison Show, 3D Radio, male prisoners phoned the station asking to be put in touch with Seeds of Affinity members to ask whether they could assist them to obtain copies of the Correctional Services Act.

References


Parsons ML and Warner-Robbins C (2002). Formerly incarcerated women create healthy lives through participatory action research. *Holistic Nursing Practice*, 16(2): 40–49.


